

Naruto: Chronicles of the Thunderclap

The day of the wolf's cry

Main Characters

Sasuke Uchiha: Ninja member of the group Hebi

Itachi Uchiha: Ninja member of the group Akatsuki

Reishi Kodon: herbalist of the Village of the Wolf's Cry

Kina Kodon: Reishi's younger brother

No light reflected in the eyes,
no voice resounding in the heart,
no road towards the future.
Raging on the human world,
nothing else but a wolf's sorrow.

Prologue: The end of revenge

The drops were falling on my face. It was raining, but I couldn't remember when it had begun.

The forest had been swallowed by the black flames: Amaterasu had dyed the trees pitch black, burned the birds, carbonised the snakes.

Why was such a sight showing in front of my eyes?

And then there was him, lying on the ground. Why was Itachi lying there? Doubts were twisting in my mind.

Why weren't my eyes been stolen and why was I the only one still alive?

I couldn't understand.

The mist, generated by the water, enveloped the black flames. Ah, right. It was me who had evoked the rain casting the great Dragon Fire technique to summon the stormy clouds.

«Disappear with the thunder.» I told Itachi, believing that they would be the last words I'd address to him.

I thought that with that blow, in which I had gathered all my remaining chakra, I could avenge the Uchiha clan, thus freeing myself from my desire of revenge. However Itachi managed to avoid Kirin, who I had cast against him with all my might.

«You have really become strong, Sasuke.»

With heavy breathing and blood dripping from his mouth, he had told me those words. What happened after that? Ah, right: Itachi had evoked a huge creature, Susanoo.

There was nothing I could do, because my chakra had almost run out.

At that moment I had heard Orochimaru's voice.

«I'll lend you my power. I know that you need me, Sasuke-kun. Didn't you have to take revenge on Itachi? Then unleash my powers. Only then you'll fulfil your desire.»

I had indulged in that voice. Orochimaru was inside me and was forcefully trying to get out.

I don't remember in the least what happened after that.

When I regained consciousness, Itachi was standing before me, covered in wounds.

«Your eyes are mine now. I want to savour this moment to the fullest.» he told me.

The rain was pouring heavily and Amaterasu was burning the forest.

I lowered my eyes on him, now lying on the ground. I could still feel the touch of his fingers on my forehead.

Why?

What happened?

Itachi had puked blood.

What happened after that?

Even if my blows had been completely rejected by Susanoo, I still had my eyes and I was standing on my feet.

Itachi's bloody hand reached out towards me while his knees were shaking violently.

He had whispered something and he reached out to touch my forehead with his kind and awfully nostalgic way of doing it.

The second after he had collapsed on the ground, while I was still standing.

The black clouds were discharging electric energy.

The rain was washing Itachi's bloody hand.

The end.

The forces left my body.

It was the end of everything.

With that last thought in my heart, I collapsed beside him.

The rain didn't seem willing to stop.

It kept pouring down, heavier and heavier, and it washed every thing. It made the bitterness fade away. It made the hatred fade away. It made everything fade away.

Itachi's last words imprinted themselves for eternity on my mind, which was becoming less and less lucid.

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Chapter 1: A black dream

1

I was standing in the middle of a forest wrapped in the night haze. It was completely dark. I couldn't see anything.

The red moon towered in the sky and I felt myself being observed from everywhere: I felt Itachi's presence in the tree crevices, behind the rocks, in the wind that was whispering like a ghost.

From the depths of the dark forest I heard some heavy footsteps coming close, matched with a heavy breathing. I tried to flee, but my legs had sunk into the ground and I couldn't move.

The mysterious beast that got to me first gritted its jaws and pounced on me.

In response to its attack I immediately threw a kunai. The moment it was pierced, the body of the creature turned into countless crows that disappeared right after, carried away by the wind. The herd of beasts surrounded me. Their phosphorescent and pale bodies looked like floating in the darkness.

«Why are you following me?»

Making his way through those creatures, a boy with a slightly blackened mask came forth walking towards me and answered me: «Because you're fleeing.»

The beasts burst out laughing.

«Do you think that all the things that Madara told you about Itachi are true?» said the masked boy.

«Itachi?»

Fragments of memories powerfully flowed inside my mind. The rivalry between the clan Uchiha and Senju, the consequences for the Leaf, the inheritors of the will of Madara Uchiha, who had deserted the village, the attempted coup d'état, and then the double-agent spy mission entrusted to Itachi.

I relived Madara's words: «Then the night of his mission came. He brought the mission to completion, but he made single mistake. Who's Itachi? For the Leaf, a good spy; for the Uchiha clan, a traitor; for Akatsuki, a disposable pawn. And then for you, Sasuke Uchiha...»

«Enough! Stop it! I don't want to listen to you! Enough!» I shouted, covering my ears. The memories of that night surfaced on my mind.

The glow of the full moon that was shining in the sky seeped into the dark room. Itachi was there, standing, stained with my father's and my mother's blood.

«If you want to kill me, hate me! Detest me! You have to survive like a wretch. Keep running and cling to life.» he told me.

With my head on the verge of breaking, I crouched into the ground. I couldn't help but think that something important was escaping me. What was it?

Why was I still alive?

That night I had pursued Itachi, the man who I once considered my elder brother.

I was just a brat. I couldn't defeat him for sure. Throwing a kunai I had hit his forehead protector, making it fall to the ground. He tied it up again and then...

«Itachi is dead. Nobody knows the truth. If that man really were Madara Uchiha, what need would he have to tell it to you? Maybe because you're a member of the Uchiha clan?» said the boy.

Someway I brought out my voice: «Madara's goal is the revival of the Uchiha clan.»

«Do you really think that?»

«There's more! Sixteen years ago Madara managed to take control over the nine-tailed demon, forcing it to attack the Leaf!»

«Madara denies that, but let's assume it was him behind the Fox's attack and his goal is the revival of the Uchiha. Don't you think it's strange that he revealed you the truth on Itachi with such a sense of timing? Supposing it were true.»

«What do you mean?»

«I mean that probably he could have revealed it to you long before.» said the boy, whose pupils were now glinting under the mask. «If he had done it, you wouldn't had had to fight against Itachi or, at least, you wouldn't have confronted in that way. Try to think about it: Itachi willingly let you defeat him for you to become the hero of the village. If Madara's goal had been the revival of the Uchiha clan, he wouldn't have revealed it to you for sure. If you had come to know the truth about Itachi, probably you wouldn't have agreed to take on the role of hero. And yet, if you had become the hero of the village, the revival of the Uchiha could have been quickly realised, too. That man, however, told you the truth just when you had defeated Itachi. For what purpose?»

I had a big mess inside my head and I couldn't clearly phrase my thoughts.

«Which is Madara's goal?» I asked the boy.

The boy's voice and Madara's overlapped: «It's not to protect you, for sure. And it isn't the revival of the Uchiha clan, too.»

The beasts burst out laughing again.

«Why? Why are you saying this?»

«Why, why, why! You're full of whys!»

«Answer my question!»

«If Madara only cared about reviving the Uchiha clan, he wouldn't need to rise up against the Leaf. It would be enough for him to build a new village along with his supporters.»

It was just like he said. «Why are you explaining all this to me?»

«You do still have whys?»

«Answer!»

«I'm not explaining. Here where we are, I am you, and you are me. All the thing I said to you, you already knew it for a long time.»

«This is a dream of mine?»

«We could say so, as we could say not.»

«Don't avoid the question!»

«I'm not avoiding anything. Here we are in the depths of your consciousness and if you feel like calling it a dream, do as you please.»

«In the depths of your consciousness?»

«Exactly.»

My sight clouded over.

«If you are a product of my consciousness, then I can do anything to you.» I said, keeping staring at the boy with the mask.

«With that sharingan it's still impossible.»

«What do you mean?»

«Until you understand the world in which we are, you won't get rid of me.» Then, turning his gaze up, he told me: «Look.»

Shining in the night sky there was no more the moon, but a huge sharingan. From that eye, that was staring motionless, bloody tears gushed out.

«Itachi is crying inside you. What do you think is the reason?» and, after a pause, he continued: «The reason is that you haven't understood a thing of this world.»

«What? Do you mean that since I can't understand my dream, Itachi can't rest in peace?»

«Now I have a question to ask. Madara is a dangerous man. He manipulates the others imposing his own will. For peace, for the Uchiha, for Itachi, for you. He even came to hide the truth about Itachi and make you fight. What's his goal? Increasing more and more the hate you're feeling.»

I was listening silently.

«You always try to vent your hate. Now that Itachi's dead, although you understood you were manipulated by Madara, you're trying to direct your grudge against the Leaf. Come on, let's hear: what's your true nature?»

«My true nature?»

«Between being controlled by others and control the others according to your own will there's a huge difference. What will your true self do from now on?»

«Stop talking as if you knew everything!»

The beasts laughed and one after the other gave out a howl that spread in the distance.

«Until you understand its meaning, it will be impossible for you to go out of this black dream. Remember that I am you, I'm Itachi, I'm the only witness that watched accurately the greatness and the decadence of the Uchiha clan.» Those were the last words of the masked boy.

The moment after the black dream deformed itself and, just like a puzzle, it started crumbling in a thousand pieces. Mixed in a vortex, the fragments turned into a thousand crows and disappeared in the air.

2

When I woke up I vaguely sensed the ticking noise of the water drops falling from the rocky surface.

For a moment I couldn't tell where I was. It was a cave room carved from the rock.

Ah, maybe I fell asleep while I was listening to Madara's words.

I couldn't tell if the dim lighting was due to the candle's flame or to the searing pain that afflicted my eyes. And I couldn't understand where the dream ended, leaving room for reality.

Still lying on the straw mat, I stared at the stalactites on the roof.

That black dream was terribly realistic.

I had the feeling that my brain was enfolded by a grey mist and I felt my head heavy.

The mangekyō sharingan high in the sky, the boy with the mask, the dark forest, the murder of crows similar to a vortex... I clearly remembered about all that, but no matter how much I rummaged in my mind, I couldn't grasp the really important thing.

After a while I convinced myself that there wasn't anything of such relevance. It was just a dream.

I told myself that in a ninja's world nothing was certain.

The second I made this consideration, I heard Itachi's voice.
«Forgive me, Sasuke. This is the last time.»
I kept staring at the roof.
Something certain.
That night, when I was still an insufferable brat, Itachi hadn't killed me.
Something certain.
Inside those eyes, that gave me a searing pain, there was the mangekyō sharingan given me by Itachi.
Something certain.
I was free from Orochimaru's seal.
And again, something certain.
Itachi had touched my forehead.
«Forgive me, Sasuke. This is the last time.»
I tried to touch my forehead, but my fingers were neither heavy, nor warm like Itachi's.
Suddenly my eyes filled up with tears and I clenched my knees to my chest.
I was once again swallowed by a short dream.
Behind Itachi, full of wounds, the people from the Leaf were laughing.
Naruto, Sakura, Kakashi, they were all laughing with an amused look.
«What's so funny?!» I shouted, dashing towards them.
My fist, however, went through Naruto's body, my kick through Sakura's, and the kunai made Kakashi slightly tremble, just as if he was a mirage.
«Quit laughing! That's enough!»
Something certain.
The Uchiha had died out, Itachi was dead and people from the Leaf were laughing.
I sensed a presence and I turned back.
«You're really having bad dreams.»
Madara's silhouette appeared from within the darkness. «So, how are your wounds?»
I raised my trunk.
«It's normal. However much he was shaken from his disease, Itachi Uchiha surely wasn't a lousy opponent.»
«Itachi...» Someway I managed to move my mouth: «Where's Itachi?»
«Zetsu and I buried him with full honours.»
«Zetsu? That sort of carnivorous plant?»
«Yes.»
«What about his eyes?»
«So you know about their secret.»
«Itachi told me. He claimed that if you steal the eyes of an Uchiha, you can get the mangekyō sharingan, whose light will shine eternally, and that you seized your brother's.»
«So this is what he told you yesterday, but the truth is that my brother presented them to me.»
I would have liked to ask him where Itachi had been buried, but I couldn't. A searing pain pierced my eyes, I covered my face with both my hands and I pulled my knees to my chest.
«It looks like you haven't got used to your mangekyō sharingan yet. The pain will last for a while.»

Madara came closer and handed me something.

«It was in Itachi's pocket. It's a little bit old, but it's better than nothing.»

It looked like eye drops.

«I have no reason to trust you. Do you really think that I'm such a thoughtless guy to put those eye drops in?» But instead of telling him this, I accepted the flask and noticed that there were some drops left on the bottom.

Itachi was dead and my revenge had been accomplished. Even if it had been poison, it wouldn't have mattered anymore.

When I put some in, my eyes cooled down and the pain settled down.

«Don't worry. Itachi's eyes has been set apart, so they can be transplanted sooner or later.» Madara told me, while his silhouette started to fade slowly.

«Supposing that what Itachi told me yesterday is the truth, what would you gain in telling me?» I asked him, rubbing my eyes hard.

Madara didn't answer. He just stood still.

«You were the one who talked to me about it and I can decide if trusting you or not. Then try to win my trust. Why did you tell me those things?» I continued, staring at him through my fingers.

A long silence followed, then Madara said calmly: «I did it to become your comrade. In his attempt to protect the Leaf, Itachi betrayed the Uchiha clan. Furthermore, he wanted you to stay loyal to the village. If you respected Itachi's will, you'd probably live in the right way, but in this case we would become enemies.»

«Do you plan to destroy the Leaf?»

«I hardly care about the Leaf.»

«You hardly care?»

«The thing I long for is much farther away.»

«Do you mean that Akatsuki was gathering the tailed beasts for this purpose?»

«Exactly.»

«Madara, what's your goal?»

«My goal? Well, if I really have to tell you, it's to lead this world towards a dimension in which justice doesn't exist.»

«What do you mean?»

«Well, let's take war for instance. It consists on the clash of two justices, but there's no way to tell which one out of the two is right. The winner's point of view is always accepted as right. This is the way the story is written.»

I listened silently.

«In other words, justice is power. Justice without power ends up being thrown away like garbage. Moreover, if it's true that justice is power, the end of the world is just a matter of time. Do you want to know why? Because it would be irreversibly damaged by the clash of most powerful beings.»

«Are you talking about the clash among tailed beasts?» I asked him, holding my breath.

«You can look at it in this way.»

«So you intend to gather the tailed beasts and try to tame them? Is this what you intend to?»

Madara said nothing. He just stared at me.

«Such thing is impossible.» Along with a sigh I threw out the fatigue that gnawed my body. «You have no idea how much problematic it is to have a tailed beast for every

village. Even with the mangekyō sharingan, it's absolutely impossible to control all the nine beasts.»

«I deduce that you're not interested in my project.»

«Even if the justice ironically disappeared from this world, the hatred would never disappear from people's heart.» I said with a sneer. «Does it mean that you want to create a world of hatred alone?»

«Hatred... If we want to talk about hatred, nobody feels hatred more than you do.»

«Say what you want.»

«Since we are in topic, I take this opportunity to tell you a thing.» It seemed that Madara was laughing under his mask. «Hatred is less harmful than justice. Do you want to know why? Hatred has an object, justice hasn't. Hatred is honest, while justice is deceitful. There are people who lose their life because of hatred, too, but the lives wrecked by the hands of justice are hundreds, thousands, ten thousands more.»

My wounds started to hurt again and I was feeling a huge sense of tiredness, but I had the feeling that I had understood what he wanted to tell me.

I could see black flames burning the Leaf to ashes.

The mere thought of using Amaterasu to burn the village that had thrown Itachi into hell made me feel relieved.

«You don't have to choose at once whether to become my comrade or not. After all, you're a ninja. You can use me without allying yourself with me as well, anyway we'll end up with the same result. Remember, Sasuke, our goals aren't incompatible. We already are beyond justice and its illusion will not affect us anymore.»

I could see that those were sophisms, but that man's words had a compelling charm. The tone of his voice was able to shake people's heart.

«Anyway, for the time being the most important thing is to treat your wounds.»

Before leaving, Madara gave me a piece of paper.

«It belonged to Itachi.»

3

It was the request of a medicament.

Some digits were written on it, and below those there was a strange wording.

The recipient matched the name "Itachi Uchiha", while the collection day dated back to a long time before. Then there was a seal affixed to it, but I had no clue on how to read those characters.

"This isn't from Granny Cat's shop?"

Granny Cat was the owner of the supplies shop located near the ruins of the Sora district, and she also sold medicaments. The Uchiha clan had always turned to her for supplying of weapons and medicaments.

That incomprehensible name could instead pertain to the new shop of which Itachi had become a customer since he had become a missing nin, in order not to leave any trace.

I looked at the eye drops flask and I noticed that the seal on it was the same.

There was an address written on it: Village of the Wolf's Cry.

That name sounded familiar to me.

If memory didn't fail me, several years before that village had declared itself neutral.

I had heard that the Village of the Wolf's Cry had invented blue explosive powder, and it had become able to defend itself thanks to that.

So the shop of which Itachi had become a customer was there.
«Especially for you, Sasuke, he chose to die, and to do it as a criminal and a traitor. But despite everything, he died happy. Worn out by a disease, he felt his death was forthcoming, but he survived gorging himself on medicaments.»

How much had Itachi's disease worsened?

When he fought against me, were his conditions already desperate?

Without noticing, I found myself looking at the back of the paper.

My eyes fixed on a word written in Itachi's handwriting: "seven".

What did that number mean?

More than the meaning it could have, it was the number itself that drew my attention.

Thinking about it, it rarely occurred to me to see Itachi's handwriting. Sensing his presence by my side, I spent several time observing that world with a puzzled look.

Suddenly an idea came to my mind.

Madara's voice echoed in my head.

«Worn out by a disease, he felt his death was forthcoming, but he survived gorging himself on medicaments.»

By going in that strangely named place, I probably would discover something about Itachi's disease. If it wasn't deadly in the end, it meant that Madara had lied and that even if he didn't know a thing about him he had glorified his death with all those nice speeches just to bring me by his side.

If the disease that afflicted him was really terminal instead, then those words had some truth in them.

I lay down on the straw mat again and I closed my eyes.

I felt a sense of numbness, my thoughts started to get more and more confused and disappeared like smoke. Tiredness has seeped deep into my bones.

I needed rest, just a little bit of rest.

I fell asleep again, but I didn't have a dream this time.

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Chapter 2: The Village of the Wolf's Cry

1

Once I left Madara's hideout, I headed south. After walking for eight days, I got to the sea and I kept going in the same direction walking alongside the beach. Beyond the gulf I could see my destination: the Three Wolves mountain range.

My head was still hurting, but thanks to Itachi's eye drops the pain in my eyes had almost disappeared. Once in a while, however, my sight blurred and I suddenly saw white.

Maybe the mangekyō sharingan was taking root in me.

If I walked absent-mindedly, memories about Itachi dimly came back to my mind. In order to avoid thinking about it, I asked some passer-by for information about the Village of the Wolf's Cry.

As I remembered, several years ago the village had issued a statement of neutrality.

However the ferryman of the boat I got onto told me there was more to it.

«Do you see those three mountains in the distance? They form a mountain range and they're called the Three Wolves: the first one is the Mountain of the Wolf's Awakening, while the second one is the Mountain of the Wolf's Nourishment. The last one is the Mountain of the Wolf's Cry, and the village that you're headed to is there. The vegetation is rife up there, and you can pick every kind of medicinal herbs. That's why it's also known as the Country of Medicines. At the beginning it was only a small shinobi village of the Kodon clan. Its inhabitants weren't concerned with large-scale activities as those of the Five Great Shinobi Countries, but taking in some small jobs and selling medicaments they managed to make a living somehow.»

«Why do the names of every mountain contain the word 'wolf'?» I asked.

«Well, according to a legend, in ancient times a monstrous creature named Rōen lived there. It was about fifteen metres (fifty feet) tall and his back was covered with silver fur. It had the head of a wolf, the body of a tiger and it walked on two legs. A long time ago it attacked the village and it ate up men and cattle. They say that the forefathers of the Kodon clan were the ones who defeated it. I thought it was only a legend, but ten years ago it appeared for real.» the old ferryman explained to me.

«What happened then?»

«The Village of the Wolf's Cry took great damages. Since the blue explosive powder had just been created at that time, the villagers tried to use it to shoot Rōen down, but in vain. They say that the great Tenma, head of the Kodon at that time, was able to chase away the monster in the end using the hypnotic genjutsu.»

«They say?»

«Nobody remembers what happened. The great Tenma's hypnotic illusory medicine didn't restrict itself to Rōen, but it affected the villagers as well. I heard that when they woke up, the creature was gone without leaving trace and the great Tenma laid dead.»

«What's the hypnotic illusory medicine?»

«It's the drug the members of the Kodon clan make use of when they use the hypnotic genjutsu.»

«A genjutsu that makes use of a drug?»

«Let's say that maybe, more than a genjutsu, it's similar to a hypnotic technique: a genjutsu breaks when the one who cast it dies, doesn't it? The great Tenma's hypnotic genjutsu, however, can't be dissolved unless the caster himself undoes it. Since it makes use of a drug, it has a stronger hold than a hypnotic technique.»

I got out of the boat and, once I crossed the dock, I found myself in front of the Mountain of the Wolf's Cry.

Thirteen days had passed since I left Madara's hideout.

«Continue walking uphill, passing through those torii! This way you'll reach the Village of the Wolf's Cry!»

With the ferryman's voice echoing behind my back, I raised my eyes up to the first torii. There was a plate on the lintel between the pillars: "The eighty-eight torii of the Wolf's Cry". Those red-varnished structures succeeded one another going up the green mountainside.

I began to go through the shrine's entrance road.

Before passing under the tenth torii, I realised that the ferryman was right: a never-seen-before variety of flowers and herbs was assembled on the Mountain of the Wolf's Cry, and it painted its surface with gaudy colours.

White butterflies were fluttering about, squirrels were running among the branches of a huge tree covered in moss. From the depths of the thick forest, the cry of an animal was spreading carried by the wind.

There weren't only medicinal herbs: even I could recognise some purple flowers on the sides of the road as a poisonous herb named aconite.

I kept going uphill towards the village.

Once inside the forest, the trees completely obstructed the passage of light, making you lose your track of time.

The torii were built to separate the earthly world from shrines. I had learned that a long time before at the Leaf's Ninja Academy.

In that place they were as much as eighty-eight, making one realise how much the Village of the Wolf's Cry was determined to maintain its neutrality. Every time they passed under a torii, visitors to the village had to leave their worldly existence behind.

I wonder if Itachi went through them, too?

Chaotic thoughts kept invading my mind.

Why hadn't he been able to leave the earthly world of the Leaf behind him?

That question, destined to be left without an answer, goaded me to go forth, pushing me step after step.

But no matter how much I hurried, I'd never be able to reach Itachi. However much I stretched it, my hand would never reach to him.

The only thing I could do was keep walking. Only by going on I would succeed in fooling myself. If I hadn't done it, how could I have walked away from Itachi's corpse under the pouring rain?

I kept going uphill towards the village, tramping the road that, in all likelihood, even Itachi had followed.

When I finally arrived to the last torii, I saw a big sun setting behind the ridge of the Three Wolves.

Finished the stairway, the forest ended abruptly, leaving room for a wide view.

The road continued up to a huge gate, which looked like the only access route. The village that splayed out beyond it was in fact surrounded by a high fence.

From afar I managed to read the big characters written above that massive build: “medicine” on the left and “poison” on the right.

The road was skirted on both sides by stalls, in front of which the merchants were loudly attracting customers.

«Come on, come all! Have a look! Our lycium barbarum is the raw material of war tonics! The turmeric is the coagulant used in Sunagakure!»

«Here we have a multipurpose medicament! Use it to dab your wounds! If you want to cure your children of a cold, one teaspoon is enough! Two teaspoons to recover from a hangover! Extracted by Mount Myōboku’s toad oil, it’s a cure-all of every disease!»

«We put any kind of venomous insects in a jar in order to make them fight! Then from the last survivor we brew an infusion! That’s how our insecticide was born! Pay attention not to touch it, because there’s no cure for it!»

«Hey, toad oil vendor! Try and drink this insecticide! If your medicament works against all diseases, you shouldn’t mind, should you?» shouted a customer.

«Please, leave me alone!» answered the vendor with a pleading voice, prompting everyone to burst out laughing.

Banners waved in front of every stand, but I had no idea how to read most of that names.

Suddenly I was stopped by a vendor. «Hey dude! You look like a wreck! Those dark circles around your eyes are due to your stomach!»

«...»

«My crow-dipper works wonderfully! If you assume it along with a cordyceps fungus you’ll feel a thousand times better!»

I pulled from my pocket the request that belonged to Itachi and I showed it to that man.

«Where’s this shop?»

The vendor’s face darkened. «The Hypericum’s Shrine? Do you plan on going there?» Hypericum Shrine... I engraved that name into my mind.

«Yes. How can I go there?»

The man looked worriedly at me. With an expression of plain uneasiness, he blinked, scratched his head and coughed to clear his throat. Then he went hooking some new customers as if he were running away.

Another merchant drew my attention. This time it was a woman. «What an awful look, young man! Those dark circles prove that there’s a build-up of toxins in your body!»

«Do I really have such a worrisome look?»

«It’s not worrisome, but it looks like you haven’t sleep in ages!»

«...»

«Give my honeysuckle a try! It has insuperable effects as antidote, antipyretic and diuretic!»

«I’d like to go to this shop.» I said.

Even that woman had the same reaction: as soon as I showed her the request, she immediately forgot herself.

«The Hypericum’s Shrine? What’s your business with that shop?»

«I just have to pick up a medicament I ordered.»

Red in the face, it seemed that the woman was on the verge of wanting to beat me. After staring at me for a while, she sulkily went back to her stall, keeping glaring at me.

Before arriving to the main gate of the village, I had asked another three people for information about the Hypericum's Shrine, but the outcome was more or less the same.

One of them had stealthily whispered to me that it was better not to name that place.

«Why?» I had asked him.

After rejecting Itachi's request as if I had touched something infected, the man had pushed me away telling me not to hinder his business.

Next to the gate there was a guard post. An officer was shouting something waving a blowhorn.

«We don't discriminate sick people in this village! We share our medicaments with everyone! However, being this a neutral country, those who own forbidden weapons will be considered dangerous individuals and will be severely punished.»

Suddenly the man spoke to me: «Hey, wait! You can't bring that sword with you. Leave it here.»

I gave him a glance. «I have no intention of leaving it. If you insist, take it from me by force.»

«What?! Are you rebelling against the orders?» he shouted.

«I go where I want and as I want. I don't take orders from anyone. Moreover, this fear of weapons has no sense.»

«...»

«If you are strong enough to disarm me, then there's nothing to fear from this weapon. If on the contrary you're not able to take my sword away from me, I'll show you how I can destroy this village with my bare hands, without needing this weapon at all.»

The officer drew back ashamed. «What's the purpose of your visit?»

«Supplying myself with medicaments.»

«How much time do you plan on staying?»

«Two or three days.»

«Which shop are you headed to?»

«The Hypericum's Shrine.»

He stared at me intently from head to toe. «You too?»

«?»

«No wonder you don't want to leave your weapon. When you have to do with the hypnotic illusory medicine, there's no lack of problems.»

«I'm not interested in that.»

«Well, let me tell you a thing: over the past year, the use of the hypnotic illusory medicine has been forbidden in our village. Recently young people think that medicaments are toys.»

«I've heard about it when I arrived. The hypnotic illusory medicine is a sort of medicament capable of improving the hold of a genjutsu, am I right?»

«Who's capable of mastering a genjutsu nowadays?»

«...»

«The hypnotic illusory medicine is an illegal drug that causes the malfunction of sight, hearing and the three semicircular canals. Or at least we classified it this way in this village. It's known under several names: "the pill of ascent", "the powder of heaven",

“the pill of affection”, “the pill of perturbation”, but it’s only rubbish. If you ingest it without due precautions, you’re a dead man.»

At least this explained the merchants’ attitude upon seeing my worn-out face, they thought I had gone to the village to obtain the substance that I was addicted to.

«How can I reach the Hypericum’s Shrine?»

«Listen, death penalty is imposed even for the mere possession of that substance in this village.»

«Why don’t you denounce that shop then?»

«Because most of the merchants uses the hypnotic illusory medicine in the making of medicaments. The main ingredients are plants and flowers grown up in this zone, and owning them is certainly not a crime.»

That made sense.

«In short, it’s a capital offence. We’re speaking on a whole different level compared to the possession of not allowed weapons.» After reiterating it, the officer pointed at the setting sun with an annoyed look.

«The Kodon shrine is located on the west of the village, and the Hypericum’s Shrine is behind it.»

2

The medicine shops followed one another even alongside the village main street.

As the banners passed before my eyes, I noticed that those names didn’t refer to the shops but to the medicaments they sold. Even I knew that “rhubarb” and “mint” were officinal herbs.

I proceeded with a steady step towards the sun, as the officer had showed me.

At nightfall I arrived in proximity of a large river. On the silvergrass-covered riverside you could catch a glimpse of the sparkle of fireflies. Among them the light of some lanterns waved in the dark. I couldn’t read what was written on them until I got a little nearer: “police”.

I subconsciously sped up my pace. I wanted to avoid dealing with the police, no matter its form.

I heard the voice of a policeman coming from the riverside: «Hey, there’s another one here!»

The lanterns gathered in the same spot and a loud noise echoed from the bridge crowded with meddlers.

«With this one, there’s six of them.»

«Heaven’s sake!»

«A friend of mine is a policeman and he told me that the corpses are dried up like mummies.»

«What the hell are the guards doing?»

«How many people have been killed?»

«It’s too dark. We can’t see anything from here.»

I looked down to the riverside through an opening amidst the crowd.

A crescent moon shined in the eastern sky.

It was fairly impossible for a normal person, but my eyes allowed me to see clearly despite the scant light.

Nearby the river two corpses were laying covered by a straw mat. The policemen hadn't noticed yet, but there was another one at the feet of one of the pines downstream.

Just like powdered light, the fireflies shrouded the corpses. Only the feet of those corpses were in sight, but they seemed so dried up that they reminded me of withered branches.

It seemed that their chakra had been completely sucked away.

While I was watching the scene though the bridge joists, a casual dressed man approached me.

«Are you a foreigner?» he whispered in my ear.

He had a large scar that spread from his right eye to his cheek.

«If you're in search of the hypnotic illusory medicine, I've got an excellent one.»

I stared at him intently.

«Isn't that substance illegal?»

«Don't fret! If you don't use it in plain sight, nobody's gonna arrest you! A third of the villagers makes a living out of this stuff.» answered the man.

«What kind do you have?»

«Every kind you want.»

«The best one?»

«The Hypericum's Shrine's Kotarō.»

«The Hypericum's Shrine's?»

«You've come here to buy the hypnotic illusory medicine, ne? Only experts react to that name!» said the man with a grin.

After thinking about it for a moment, I tried to get some information.

«Give me number seven.»

«Number seven? What does it mean?»

«Nothing.»

The scarred drug dealer rubbed his thumb and forefinger together.

«That's a thousand ryō.»

I paid the amount of money and I took a small waxed paper bag.

«Thank you for your purchase.»

The man assumed a pompous air and disappeared among the meddlers. On the back of his dirty coat a big writing stood out: "Hermit".

Only three pills were inside the bag.

«Who could have done such a terrible thing?! You didn't see such barbarities in the past!»

As usual meddlers found a great pleasure in talking about murder cases.

«It's the work of a foreigner for sure. There's no doubt about it.»

«It could be a clash between the dealers of that trash otherwise.»

I wondered if those people were really that dumb.

I placed the bag in my inside pocket and, without listening to those nosy witnesses of other people's misfortunes, I crossed the bridge leaving the moon at my back.

The culprit was definitely a ninja.

According to what the ferryman told me, a long time before that was a shinobi village, and that meant that shinobi were still there.

Suddenly one day it declared neutrality. Probably its inhabitants managed to ensure their livelihood by selling medicaments, without having to take missions from the Five Great

Shinobi Countries. Their live was no more threatened by dangerous tasks and enemies didn't target the village anymore.

But what happened to shinobi?

Some of them managed to enter the defence forces, but what had become of the others?

Nothing was more insufferable than a ninja without duties.

In a village that gave so much credit to the trading market, the ones who had piled up lots of money were considered worthy people.

Confined in a corner of society, ninja were treated just as stray dogs, despite they had dirtied their hands for the village's well being. That's why they had started selling the hypnotic illusory medicine.

Who could say the same thing would not happen to the Leaf?

At that thought I suddenly felt like laughing.

One day, the Leaf must meet the same fate. A reckless invention or the discovery of a most valuable resource could upset the balance.

This way the society in which shinobi were very influential people would crumble in an instant. The divine protector of the village wouldn't be the hokage anymore, but money, and guys like Naruto would live without being able to fight with anyone.

Naruto that can't fight with anyone? That's rich! I burst out laughing. Ninja had no other use.

Since there was no one around me, I let myself go in a loud laughter.

A dog, maybe scared by the noise, barked in the distance.

As long as the shinobi world keep existing, probably a second or third Itachi will appear.

With the valid reason of protecting the village, there will always be someone forced to sacrifice himself.

Was it really worth going that far?

In the end, what distinguished the Leaf's way of doing from Madara's?

And where was I heading?

I resumed my journey towards the Kodon Shrine. I met a mother with her little daughter along the way. The child, who was holding the woman's hand, pointed at me and said: «Hey, mum! That boy looks sick. Is he wounded?»

The moment she raised her eyes, the woman suddenly yanked her daughter's hand and she walked off at a quick pace.

Sick?

Me?

And yet I felt so good at the thought of destroying the Leaf!

While the autumnal breeze enfolded my body, I stopped and lowered my gaze to my shadow. After staring at it for a while, I had the feeling that I had become my shadow and my shadow had become me.

It might be that the little girl from before was a demon.

She had tried to tell me that my hatred towards the Leaf wasn't deep enough yet.

3

The Kodon Shrine, devoted to the patron deity of the clan that had always been protecting the village, had fallen apart.

As a nostalgic reminder of its past glory, a majestic beech stood up in the surrounding garden.

After passing under the wonky torii worn out by white ants, I found myself before a small sanctuary dedicated to prayer, missing half of the roof.

The zone for purification was covered in mud and dead leaves, the donation box charred and the wall full of writings.

When I went on the back of the small shrine, I saw a stone stairway and I managed to catch sight of the roof of a house further below. The light was off, but nonetheless I went down the stairway and stopped in front of the building.

What must have been a majestic gate ten years before was now so slanting that a gust of wind would be enough to knock it down.

In the almost wholly erased characters of a threadbare banner a name could be read: "Hypericum's Shrine".

I could tell from the moon's position that it was almost midnight. I went back to the shrine.

I hadn't noticed at first, but a stone monument had been erected near the small shrine. The word "worship" was engraved on it alongside with the shapes of two creatures that were facing each other: one was clearly a wolf while you could tell that the other one, who had its snout completely erased, was a tiger thanks to the stripes in his body. They were both extremely worn out. The word "seal" was written on the wolf's back and it seemed that there was something written even on the tiger's back, but reading it was impossible.

Maybe it was meant to stand for the Kodon clan fighting against Rōen, but it was neither particularly beautiful nor original.

«What a foolish thing.»

I broke through the door of the small shrine with a kick and I went inside.

The moonlight was spreading through the shabby floorboards.

I lay on the ground, crossed my arms behind my head and raised my eyes up to the crescent moon that shined beyond the torn roof.

A couple of fireflies floated lightly in the air. No, it was impossible for them to be fireflies.

I hadn't paid attention to it, but we were already in autumn, and that meant that the season of the fireflies had ended long ago.

However some insects that radiated a green light came twirling in the shrine, only to fly away the second after.

I sensed a threat and I jumped up with a jolt. When I turned around, I discovered that it was a small white snake, slithered out of one of the cracks on the wall.

Slightly nervous, I lay down on the ground again.

«If you want to kill me, hate me! Detest me! You have to survive like a wretch. Keep running and cling to life.»

I had swallowed Itachi's words. I hadn't been able to understand how much suffering hid in them.

I felt a pain in my chest so hard that I felt like I was being eaten up alive.

«Remember, Sasuke, our goals aren't incompatible. We already are beyond justice and its illusion will not affect us anymore.»

And still I persisted in wanting to accept what Madara had told me?

«Careful, Sasuke. Don't let yourself be confounded by words and pay attention not to lose sight of the reality they hide.» I told myself.

A new threatening presence powerfully dragged me out of that light sleep.

It wasn't a snake this time.

Beyond the opening on the roof the moon had disappeared.

In its place, I saw three shadows passing through the night sky. I counted to three and I raised both my legs. Pushing myself up from the floor with a thrust of my shoulders, I leapt up. I jumped outside through the opening on the roof and I hid.

The chill of the dawn completely woke up my cells that were still asleep.

I gave a swift glance to the scene and I saw the three shadows jumping on the tree branches, whirling in the sky and, just like shooting stars, disappearing behind the back of the small shrine.

The wind suddenly rose, prompting the beech in the garden to swing wildly around.

The clouds were running quickly and the stars were emitting a cold light.

I saw a lightning flash by. The moment after, a deafening noise shook the night sky.

Boom!

Another one followed.

Boom!

I immediately leapt from the shrine's roof and I dashed towards the place of the explosion.

I jumped down the stairway, but before I could land I heard someone screaming.

Immediately after I saw high flames coming from the Hypericum's Shrine.

The fire had already enveloped the gate and, nourished by the wind, it was quickly moving towards the main building. I got up again with a jump.

From above I managed to sight two silhouettes that were running back and forth in the garden: they were filling a bucket with water and were trying to put out the fire.

However it looked like that the fire was mocking them and it kept twirling in the air, as if nothing could stop his dance.

Anger overwhelmed me.

I felt like Itachi's memory had been desecrated.

When I became aware of it, my hands were already discharging energy.

From the corner of my eye I detected the three shadows towards the north.

«Chidori!»

I hurled my technique to the garden's ground.

My Chidori uplifted the ground and with a powerful burst of wind it wiped the flames away in one shot, from the gate to the main building. Not only the fire was swept away: the two people that were trying to put out the fire were assailed by the air stream and hurled against the wall.

From first to last, the windows of the main building broke in a thousand pieces and the gate fell violently to the ground.

The garden was covered in black smoke and dust.

Hit by Chidori, the ground had noticeably collapsed.

I felt a threatening presence behind my back, I turned around and I managed to avoid an attack.

«Do you belong to the Sendō clan too?»

«...»

Among the fireflies that were fluttering in confusion, a bare-chested boy was holding a kunai in his hand. He was wearing his hair straight upward and he was staring intently in

front of him: there was something of the past Naruto in him. At the back of his head he wore a mask.

«You're come to steal the Kotarō?»

Saying that he poorly threw the kunai against me. Even in that blow, straight and monotonous as if he didn't know other blows, I could see the past Naruto.

He didn't even scratch me.

«Damn it! Why don't you run for your life?»

«It wasn't me who set the fire. I only put out the flames.» I said.

«Liar!»

The boy gathered his energies on his hips and he hurled himself at me as to tear my guts apart.

«You'll never know where the Kotarō is!» he shouted.

I avoided his attack, dashed towards him and poked that rage-filled forehead with my fingers.

«Ouch!»

«I told you it wasn't me!» I reiterated.

He jumped backwards and, vigorously rubbing his forehead, he kept glaring angrily at me. Once again he was identical to that moron.

We heard a voice coming from nearby: «That's enough, Kina! He has nothing to do with the Sendō clan!»

A young man, with his long hair tied in a ponytail and a yellow kimono, appeared.

«And how do you know? I'll get him and make him spit out the truth!» shouted the boy named Kina.

«Didn't you see the crest on his back?»

«Crest?»

«Yes, the Uchiha clan's.»

«Really? Then you must be Itachi's younger brother!» said Kina, widening his eyes.

The long haired young man turned to me: «Please forgive my brother's impertinence. My name is Reishi. I'm the owner of the Hypericum's Shrine.»

I stared at him intently, then I asked him: «You know Itachi?»

«It's natural. In the past few years he had been our only honest customer.» he answered.

4

After we passed an intensive night tidying up the place, Kina made some breakfast. He was still wearing a mask on the back of his head, but now he was wearing a blue working outfit. When he noticed I was watching him, he told me: «Are you looking at this? It's a memento of my father.»

It was a hawk-shaped mask.

«What's up?»

«Nothing, I just have the feeling that I've already seen it somewhere.» I answered, diverting my eyes from it.

«Uh? Where?»

I stared at the mask again: there was no doubt, it wasn't the first time I had looked at it.

The thick mist that enfolded my mind, however, prevented me from remembering where.

I answered in the only possible way: «Maybe it's just my imagination. What is it?»

«A long time ago this mask was worn by the Anbu in our village. It's an original one, you know! This scratch on the upper part was caused by a shuriken. Marvellous, isn't it?» explained Kina, strutting and prideful.

«Enough with the chattering! Come on, let's eat before the food becomes cold!» Reishi interfered.

The breakfast consisted in a dish of vegetables, some broth and some onigiri. It was very simple, but it had a really appetising look.

I turned away and said: «I'm not hungry.»

«We may sell drugs too, but don't assume we want to poison you.»

I glared at Reishi.

«Don't underestimate me. Do you really think that I would accept food from a stranger just as if I were a dog?»

«Yes. Ninja are like that.»

At that point, Kina turned at me with a cold look: «Don't eat then. I had purposely cooked Itachi's favourite meal for you, but if you think I'm gonna poison you, you're not worth really much as ninja.»

«You really don't have an eye for people. You've been lucky to get away with it up to now.» he added, without paying any attention to Reishi's rather disturbed expression.

«I didn't say I won't eat.»

«But you said you're not hungry, didn't you? You don't have to eat by force.» he said, wincing.

«I'm not hungry, but eating when you have the chance to do so is part of a ninja's duties.» I answered, trying to prevent my stomach from rumbling.

I gripped my chopsticks and began eating so greedily that I left myself dumbfounded.

I ate the vegetables, drank the broth and stopped to stare at the bowl: Itachi's favourite dish was simple, but I hadn't expected that it tasted so pleasantly.

Reishi and Kina watched the scene, exchanged a glance and then burst out laughing.

«It's not so bad, despite having been made by a brat.» I said.

I hadn't had a hot meal in a long time. Sitting on the wooden floor around the brazier, we all began eating.

Kina stuffed his mouth with onigiri.

Seeing my stunned expression, he laughed satisfied.

«Itachi loved seaweed onigiri. Are you fond of it too?» he asked me.

«Oi, Kina! That's no way to talk!» Reishi scolded him.

«What did I say wrong?!»

Trying not to let my turmoil leak out, I lowered my head and ate some onigiri.

«I like the ones with dried tuna in it best.»

Reishi nodded in approval, while Kina burst out laughing again.

I hadn't eaten such a hot meal in a really long time. Kneeling with his back straight, Reishi ate quietly. A deep sense of gratitude for what he had leaked out of his whole body, and it looked like he couldn't wish for anything more.

Kina instead was sitting with his leg crossed and he was loudly drinking his broth. When his brother rebuked him, he drank even more loudly mischievously.

«When will you understand, Kina? People get to know who you are by observing your attitude.» said Reishi.

«I don't give a damn about what the villagers think!»

Reishi looked at Kina with a stern expression, then he turned to me, smiling sheepishly:
«Please forgive his insolence.»

I nodded.

«Do you like it, Itachi's brother? I cooked these seaweeds with my own hands!» Kina told me.

«Sasuke.»

«Uh?»

«My name is Sasuke. This onigiri is not bad.»

I drank the broth, ate the salted vegetables and took another onigiri.

Kina's caring behaviour melted little by little my stiffened heart. I had cooked seaweed onigiri expressly for me.

Those two brothers reminded me of Itachi and myself: the younger one, that naively follows the elder's every step, with the latter serving as well as a parent.

They emanated a deep sense of safeness, aware of the fact that together they would overcome any trouble.

That's exactly why they didn't convince me.

I put my chopsticks down and I drew the waxed paper bag out of my pocket.

«While I was heading here, I got myself this.» I said.

Suddenly the atmosphere became tense.

The friendly smile he was wearing the moment before vanished from Kina's face. Now he was looking at me with an unfriendly expression, gritting his teeth.

Reishi was staring motionless at the dishes before him.

«The drug dealer told me that this is the best kind of hypnotic illusory medicine you can find. It seems to be the Hypericum's Shrine's Kotarō.» I added.

Kina threw his chopsticks away, got up and snatched the bag from my hands in anger.

After tossing it on the ground, he stomped on it with force.

«This junk has nothing to do with Kotarō! Do you want to seize the hypnotic illusory medicine as well?!» he shouted, kicking my dishes away.

Hurled against the wall, the plate and the bowl broke.

At that point Reishi jumped in: «That's enough, Kina. Sasuke only came to take Itachi's medicaments.»

«I thought he was a good fellow, but at this point it's possible that even Itachi made all his way here just to obtain the Kotarō! After all, his medicament contained that substance, too!» continued Kina, unable to restrain his rage.

«Itachi is not that kind of guy!»

«You're too gentle, Reishi! That's why the villagers mistreat you!»

Reishi assumed a worried expression.

Kina shook his fist towards me and said: «Oi, spit it out! You too are aiming at the Kotarō, aren't you? Your brother told you to come and steal it, didn't he? Well, sorry for you. The Kotarō can only be produced inside Reishi's body! It's impossible to seize it!»

Without taking my eyes off Kina, I said: «Itachi's dead».

A deep silence fell.

Kina stood still, with his fist still clenched.

Lightened by the morning light that entered from the window, dust was floating in the air, gleaming.

What a pitiful thing, seeing those dishes scattered on the ground.

Reishi was the one who broke the silence: «I'm sorry, Sasuke. Kina didn't mean to...»
«I know. I don't know your reasons, but it's natural for Kina to doubt me. I don't care about the Kotarō, and if I bought those pills, it was just because I've been told that they came from here. I just only wanted to verify the reputation of the shop Itachi trusted so much. That's all.»

«This Kotarō is not authentic. The recipe is written on the blood of us members of the Kodon clan.» said Reishi, picking up the bag whose content had shattered in a thousand pieces.

«Is it a sort of kekkei genkai?»

«It's nothing so impressive. The main ingredient is an extremely common plant that can be picked on the Three Wolves. Once it gets assimilated by the body, the production starts. That's why it's impossible to steal it. It isn't pills, let alone a substance that grows somewhere. I don't know what they say, but those rumours have no root or leaves! Ha, ha, ha!»

«Uh?»

«Er... Well, ultimately the Kotarō doesn't grow anywhere and the information owned by those who want to get possession of it is unfounded. It a common saying that an unfounded rumour is something that has no root nor leaves, isn't it?» Reishi explained to me in a hurry, looking at my aghast face.

«Reishi, please! Sasuke's new here! Don't start with your jokes!»

Ah, that's it, it was a pun.

«Ahem... Anyway, this Kotarō is not authentic.»

«That's why Kina said we'll never know where the Kotarō is.» I said, giving a nod of approval with my head.

«You said you bought it from a drug dealer last night, right?»

«Yes, on a wide long bridge down the road leading here.»

«It's the Bridge of Honeysuckle.» said Reishi.

They he drew a pen out of the sleeve of his kimono and he wrote something on the bag.

«When you spot a fake, you have to write down the time and place of your purchase.

That's for when it's handed over to the police.»

«Is Itachi's medicament prepared with the Kotarō, too?»

«Kotarō is a hypnotic illusory medicine, but combined with other medicinal herbs it becomes a powerful sedative. The plants used for the medicaments that are sold in this village can all be picked on the Three Wolves. Depending on how they're mixed you can obtain over three hundred kinds of different medicaments.»

I pulled Itachi's request out of my pocket and I asked him: «What does this classification system with symbols and numbers mean?»

«The number refers to the medicament. In order to protect the customer's privacy, it's forbidden to write their names down.»

«What about the wording below?»

«It shows the intensity of side effects: there are not very effective medicaments and so contraindication-free. Then there are middle-ranked ones, that don't develop any kind of toxicity if ingested for limited periods of time. In the end there is this last kind, that is extremely effective medicaments, though they have strong side effects.»

«What kind of disorder do they cause?»

«In Itachi's eye drops' case, a temporary loss of sight can occur.»

«I see.» That's why I had seen completely white.

I turned the request upside down. «Do you have any idea of what does this seven mean?

It looks like he wrote it himself.»

Reishi's look became elusory.

«No... Er, I don't know...»

I couldn't understand what was troubling him, but I decided that changing the subject was the best thing to do.

«Could you talk to me a little about Itachi?»

Before he could open his mouth, Kina placed himself in front of me.

«I'm sorry for before.»

«It's okay.»

«I didn't want to speak ill about Itachi, but there's a lot of people that wants to gain possession of the Kotarō.» he said roughly.

«You were right.»

«Uh?»

«Don't let your family be underestimated. Your duty is to protect this shop.» I said.

Kina nodded heartily.

«Actually I don't know much about him. He came and bought his medicament once or twice a year. But...» said Reishi.

«But?»

After a moment of hesitation, finally he spoke: «But he said that if one day his brother had come here, it would have meant that he, probably, had already died. He added that he would want to live for another while in order to carry out some things, after that he wouldn't care about anything anymore. For this reason I prepared a stronger medicaments for him, but with stronger side effects: it provoked a searing pain to the lungs and contaminated the blood of the one who made use of it.»

Inside me I thought that it was so typical of Itachi: everything so minutely foreseen, everything so terribly sad.

«Had he suffered?»

I didn't know what to answer.

I replayed in my mind the scene when he summoned Susanoo: in the throes of pain, he had clung his chest for a moment and he had coughed blood. Maybe then...

«Was his health condition already hopeless?» I asked.

«I'm sorry.» said Reishi, looking away.

I shook my head: «You've nothing to feel sorry about.»

At that point Kina spoke up: «Itachi was always calm and quiet. He even helped me when those from the Sendō clan were annoying me. It also happened that he would stop and slept in the shrine on the back until the medicament was ready. From time to time I brought him some seaweed onigiri. At first, whatever thing I asked him he just remained silent. However little by little he began talking to me. That's why I knew about his brother. One day I tried to ask him what kind of guy you were, and he burst out laughing happily.»

I listened to him silently.

«After a moment of hesitation, he gazed into the distance and told me that you were like me as far as simplicity and honesty. He added, however, that since you were completely

unable to show your good intentions, he continuously had to keep his eyes on you to prevent you from getting into trouble. Are you crying, Sasuke?»

«No, it's just my eyes that...»

I turned away and changed the subject. «What do you tell me about this Sendō clan?»

«It's a group of failed ninja. They're the ones who deal with the hypnotic illusory medicine. After the village's declaration of neutrality, the unemployed ninja formed a gang and started acting like criminals. Under their leader's guide, Jiryū Sendō, they began selling poor quality stuff.» Reishi explained to me.

«Do they want to take possession of the Kotarō?»

«The Kotarō is a hypnotic illusory medicine that our father created in order to get rid of a monster named Rōen. Jiryū Sendō put his eyes on this very powerful hallucinogen and he's plotting on taking possession of it to gain from it. There are numerous shinobi that can't adapt to a neutral state and use that substance to escape from such a harsh reality.»

«I don't give a damn about what will happen to this village! When our father died, the villagers changed their attitude towards us! Damn them! They'll pay for it!» shouted Kina, slamming his fist on his palm.

«Why?»

«They all claim that our father controlled Rōen, making it attack the village.»

I had a déjà vu: Madara Uchiha that attacks the Leaf controlling the Nine Tailed Demon. The image of the village destroyed by the tailed beast flashed before my eyes.

«Kina, there's no need to tell everything to a stranger!» Reishi abruptly interrupted him. Kina bit his lips and glared sternly at his brother.

«Sasuke, I'm sorry you came here just right now, but because of yesterday's big commotion all the medicaments' jars broke. I need time to prepare medicaments. I'd be grateful if you could come another day.» said Reishi with a detached expression. He seemed a whole new person.

«I guess I'll wait.»

«It's not easy to prepare a medicament. After picking the medicinal herb, you need to make it exsiccate, then wash it and cook it well. A lot of time is needed for the components to alter themselves.» he insisted.

«I won't cause any trouble to you.»

«But...»

«Kina...» I said.

«Yes?»

«Add some salt to those onigiri.»

«...»

«Should you need anything, you can find me in the shrine.»

With those words, I left the Hypericum's Shrine.

5

Kina came and saw me the same night.

I was sitting on the stairs next to the fence and, surrounded by the dusky breeze, I was watching the fireflies hopping around the bushes.

«They're not common fireflies. They're called "shogun fireflies"» Kina explained to me.

«Shogun fireflies? It's the first time I hear this name.»

«They only live on the Three Wolves! You can find them all year long.»

I nodded.

«The ones you see are mostly males, because the female ones are caught by the village shopkeepers.»

«Do you get medicaments out of them?»

«I don't know much about it, but it seems that the scent produced by the female specimens is appealing for men too. My brother told me that it's for this reason women use it as perfume.»

«I see.»

One of those insects left the bush to settle on the mask that was covering Kina's face. Soon after another one followed.

«Why are you wearing your mask today?»

Kina didn't answer and slightly lowered his head.

At that point I stretched my hand and I removed the mask. His face clearly suggested that he had been beaten: he had several scratches on his cheeks and his lips were split.

«What happened to you?» I asked him.

Kina didn't answer and he simply handed the bag full of onigiri to me.

«They're not poisoned.» he said.

We ate the onigiri with dried tuna sat on the stairway.

«It was those from the village.»

«I see.»

With our gaze towards the first star of the day, we contemplated the red clouds in the sky. From time to time we sent away the shogun fireflies that flied around us, carried by a light breeze.

«Won't you ask me why did they do it?»

«It's your right not talking about it.»

Kina made a surprised face.

«What's up?» I asked him.

«Nothing. It's just that Itachi told me the same thing once.» he answered, lowering his eyes.

«Ah, I see.»

«A long time ago a monster called Rōen lived in this village.»

I remembered the ferryman's words.

«It was a huge silver wolf that, after living for a thousand years, obtained a extraordinary magic power: by sucking the men's chakra, it could grant himself an everlasting life. Ten years ago, when I was still an infant, my mother and my father were killed while they were hunting that monstrous creature. It was my brother who raised me.»

«How old are you?»

«Eleven.»

«I see.»

«Yesterday my brother wasn't really mad at me when I said those things about the villagers.»

I tried to snatch some information from him: «Why do you hate this village?»

Before opening his mouth, Kina stared into space for a while.

The wind made the beech swing violently, scattering its leaves on the ground.

«The people of the village are persuaded that my father unsealed Rōen on purpose. My brother told me that at that very period they were taking decisions about the neutrality of

this village: the clan Kumanoi, which had created the blue explosive powder, was in favour, while my family was against. At that moment Rōen appeared. The Kumanoi's cylinders revealed themselves to be completely inefficient.» Kina explained to me in a choked voice.

«What are the cylinders?»

«The smaller cylinder is a weapon similar to a peashooter. The blue explosive powder blows up if it makes contact with water: after putting it inside the cylinder, it detonates with the moist component of human breath, thus blowing some stones from the tip of the tube. They say it's two hundred times more powerful than a peashooter. The greater cylinder is a bigger version of the weapon. It doesn't exploit the breathing, but the water that flows inside the tube.»

«Didn't they work on Rōen?»

«That's why, even if my father gave his life to get rid of that monster, the villagers...»

«They spread the rumour that your father undid the seal in order to put the faction in favour of neutrality in danger?»

«It was the Kumanoi who spread this lie!»

«What's left of that clan now?»

«They left thanks to the money gained from selling their invention. The Village of the Wolf's Cry became neutral making use of the blue explosive powder, instead of shinobi. The members of the Kumanoi clan knew that they would always have some money available wherever they moved to.»

«Yeah.»

«However, suddenly the chance to redeem our honour has appeared. Lately some unusual cases of murder have been taking place.» said Kina, his eyes gleaming.

«Are you referring to those drained corpses?»

«If I managed to catch the culprit, maybe the villagers would change their minds on our clan.»

I stared at him in the eyes. «Then you've come to me asking for my help?»

«Don't you want to?»

«Why would I do such a thing? I only came here to take a medicament.»

The boy bowed his head deeply.

«I am a ninja. If you want my help, you'll have to give me an adequate reward.»

«R-reward?»

I explained it to him clearly: «Exactly. From tomorrow on, every day you'll bring me onigiri with dried tuna.»

Watching Kina dance with joy, I silently sighed. He was really a fool. If he was thinking that I would seriously look for the culprit, he was nothing but a fool, just like Naruto.

Naruto: Chronicles of the Thunderclap
The day of the wolf's cry

Chapter 3: Reishi and Kina

1

That very night Kina and I started monitoring the situation, or rather it's more accurate to say that we were playing doing stakeouts.

Anyway, according to Kina's tales, all the corpses had been found in the village outskirts. The plan was flawless: if I had been the culprit, I would have chosen an unfrequented place too.

«Yesterday three men have been killed by the riverbed, under the Bridge of Honeysuckle. Until now it never occurred that two murders in a row were committed in the same place.»

Kina unfolded a map and showed to me the places I should have monitored. «Therefore, Sasuke, I'd like you to watch over the surroundings of the Lake of the Cape Jasmines.»

I showed myself willing to cooperate, but I hadn't the slight intention to do so.

Then Kina pointed to a hill located slightly at south of the Lake of the Cape Jasmines.

«I'll take care of the Mausoleum of the Thorny Mount.»

«Mausoleum? Is it the tomb of an important person?»

«Yes, the Village of the Wolf's Cry founders'.»

«I see.»

«I'll finish my stakeout at sunrise.»

«You're the boss. Do as you want.»

«Just during this month, they've found wizened corpses six times. I estimated that someone is killed once every three or four days. Therefore...»

«If we're lucky, we'll be able to catch the culprit.»

«Exactly.»

«So, tell me something: there should be both policemen and guards in this village. Why haven't you thought about asking them?» I asked.

«Sasuke, what kind of person do you think the culprit is?»

«Well...»

«Give me an accurate answer.»

I turned my eyes to the sky and said: «Well, from what I saw yesterday, the corpses' chakra has been sucked out: this means that the culprit is a ninja.»

«I think so, too. The guards are only able to get rid of criminals using the cylinders. As long as he's a normal ninja, their forces might be enough, but it's probable that the culprit we're after is a whole other thing.» said Kina.

«Do you mean that the guards wouldn't be able to defeat him?»

«Exactly.»

«If it's so, then it would be impossible for you as well, wouldn't it?»

«Don't think of me just as a brat! I have my own special hypnotic illusory medicine. My brother's Kotarō has no rivals: with my "Kina special" I'll be able to defeat any opponent! I'm a bit familiar with ninja techniques, too.» he said, patting his pocket.

«Did you tell Reishi about all these things?»

«Obviously not! It's a secret!» he exclaimed, looking at me with a disbelieving expression.

«Just as I thought.»

«Now I'm going home and after he falls asleep I'm sneaking off in secret.»

«And you're going to go back stealthily before he awakes?»

«Of course, because I have to make your onigiri for breakfast.»

What was I doing?

I watched Kina's silhouette running back home triumphantly, then I went back to the shrine and I took a nap.

I thought it was crazy to play that way with a boy.

I made a dream: I was Itachi and Kina was me. Kina had said something cheeky and I had poked his forehead.

I hadn't slept so well in a long time.

2

It looked like Kina hadn't lied to me, but I'm not talking about the murders.

The day we started taking stakeouts, before he could reach his destination he was beaten twice.

The first time a drunkard told him: «Oi, Kodon brat! Where are you hiding Roen? Are you planning on making it attack the village again?»

Kina lost it and hauled himself against him, but he ended up being beaten.

The second time he was targeted by some brats from the village.

«Oi kid! Surely you're making tons of money with the takings of the hypnotic illusory medicine! Why don't you share some with us?»

Kina tried to face them, but he took so many hits that he couldn't get up.

In spite of being reduced to a rag, he spent the whole night watching over the Mausoleum of the Thorny Mount, in company of the shogun fireflies.

Even the second and third day things went more or less on the same way.

Rather than catching the murderer, Kina was being assaulted by the villagers, which insulted his origins and beat him up. Even dogs barked at him.

Even though he bravely tried to face the ones who challenged him, the most he managed to do was getting new wounds.

From the treetops, the house roofs and behind the tombstones I watched him while he was being bullied.

The fourth day, however, things went differently.

As usual, down the road to reach the Mausoleum of the Thorny Mount, Kina had been targeted by the villagers. As he staggering got to the tomb, he found some man that were looking for an excuse to pick a fight after they've made use of the hypnotic illusory medicine.

«Isn't this kid Tenma Kodon's son?»

«Oi brat! Thanks to your father's failure, this village became neutral and we ninja became jobless! How do you plan on refund us?»

Kina shouted something, but not loudly enough for me to hear.

Shogun fireflies were performing a wild dance, alternating moments of light and dark.

«We broke your big brother's snout the other day. He was quiet all by himself picking some medicinal herbs.»

«He burst out crying and pleaded us to stop, saying that he would do anything! Ha, ha, ha!»

They were all laughing their heads off, loudly clapping their hands.
On the previous days I had understood that if he was provoked Kina accepted any kind of challenge. He wouldn't stand back, not even in front of ninja.
Those men beat him, kicked him, and, after grabbing him by his hair, they violently slammed his head against a tombstone.
One of them, who probably enjoyed mistreating the weaklings, drew out a kunai and shouted: «However things will go, this village won't feed us! So let's kill the brat and become missing nin!»
Kina kept staring at them with the eyes of a person who didn't prove fear, but I wouldn't have done the same in his place. I knew exactly how painful was to be pierced by a kunai and I knew the ruthlessness of bloodthirsty shinobi.
«Stop immediately or I'll kill you.»
On seeing me appear from behind the tomb, the men stopped altogether.
«And who are you supposed to be?»
«Who do you think you are? The paladin of justice? We'll kill you too!»
«S-sasuke? What are you doing here?»
With his face completely covered in blood, Kina blinked dumbfounded.
«You moron! Yours aren't fights, but out-and-out suicidal acts!»
Before Kina could say anything, I saw a kunai coming right at me.
I slightly moved my head, grabbed the kunai and sent it back to his owner.
It drove into the man's thigh, and he fell on the ground and started shouting: «Whaaaaa! My leeeeeeeg!»
«You're a ninja too?»
I turned to the other two and said: «There's no gravedigger around? It'll mean that you'll dig your grave on your own.»
«You bastard! What did you say?! You're bluffing!»
«Ok. Then I'll think about that. Chidori!» The lighting spurted from my hand.
A violent explosion disrupted the rest of the dead, carving a hole of the right size on the ground.
«Who wants to go first?»
The two men lost any ounce of bravery.
«Whaaa! Who the hell are you?»
«Don't ever come near this boy again, understood?» I said, threatening them with my glare.
While those rogues took flight dragging their wounded comrade, I took Kina on my shoulders. He had lost consciousness.
I carried him that way up to the Hypericum's Shrine.
I thought that I unintentionally got stuck in business that didn't concern me. I felt like I had fed an abandoned dog, even if I had no intention of keeping it with me.
However the thing in itself wasn't particularly negative.
What wasn't fine at all was thinking of that abandoned dog as something mine.
In the midway Kina woke up, but he didn't ask me to put him down. I pretended I hadn't noticed and kept walking.
Emitting their characteristic green light, the shogun fireflies followed us everywhere.

As I imagined, Kina was sternly reproached by Reishi.

«What were you thinking?! Then it was because of those deep wounds that you didn't take off your mask even at home!»

«So what should I do then?! Keep being teased by the villagers?! I'll show 'em who I am!» shouted Kina.

«You were lucky that Sasuke was there! They could have killed you!»

«I'm not like you! I don't fear death!»

Reishi slapped him.

Kina fell on the ground, but he kept staring at his brother in hatred.

«Those guys from before have told me, you know. "We broke your big brother's snout.

He was quiet all by himself picking some medicinal herbs. He burst out crying and pleaded us to stop, saying that he would do anything"!»

«Stop it!»

But Kina didn't stop: «You're a coward! You know nothing about me, you don't even try to understand me!»

«I promised our father that I would protect you no matter what would happen.» said Reishi, without concealing a suffering expression.

«I'm not a kid anymore!»

«There isn't a solution for everything. Sometimes you can't help but endure.»

«Endure, endure! It's always the same old story! Since I was born, I did nothing but endure! For how long will I have to go on like this? Endure?! Did it do us some good?!»

Reishi gritted his teeth firmly.

«A promise to our father, uh? I already know everything.» said Kina.

«What are you talking about?»

«Actually you think that he was the one that made a mistake, don't you? I murmured something once, while you were picking plants.»

«!»

«Did you think nobody would hear? "Father, why did you do it? Because of you, Kina and I have so many troubles"...»

«Quit it.»

«"I hate you, Father."»

«Quit it!»

«You're only afraid to fight!»

«What would you know?!»

«We're living in this village like worms! Moaning won't help us change things! That's what I know!»

«Kina! Where are you going?!» shouted Reishi, looking at his brother swiftly leaving the house.

Instead of disappearing with him, Kina's anger kept floating in the air, just like a ghost.

For a long time Reishi stood still with his eyes gazing into nothingness.

In the garden the crickets were performing a fresh melody.

Behind the grass blades, below the tree and inside the shrine's fence, even that night the shogun fireflies were seeking their love, emitting a flashing green-coloured light.

«Thank you, Sasuke. Kina asked for your help for such a silly thing...» Reishi told me.

«You don't have to thank me. It was me who let him hire me.»

«Hire?»

«In exchange for dried tuna onigiri.»

At those words, Reishi's expression became more relaxed.

He made me a terribly bitter medicinal herbal tea, and we sipped it silently for a while.

«Kina... Nay, we are considered a nuisance for this village. My brother wanted to solve the murder cases to be finally accepted by our people.»

I silently drank my tea.

«I'll see that he listens to me. So please, Sasuke, about this matter, don't...»

«You don't have to worry. I was never interest in this matter in the slightest. I played detective with him just to kill the time.»

Reishi nodded.

I tried to touch the subject: «I'm a stranger and don't mean to interfere, but haven't you ever thought about leaving the village?»

«Yeah, lots of times. However this village is full of resources and it's perfect for a herbalist like me.»

Nonchalantly, He had changed the subject.

He was staring at his tea motionless, as if it somehow carried a response. Then he raised his eyes and asked me: «Do you think that the world is better out there?»

I didn't know what to answer.

I thought about the quarrels with the other villages, about the deadly clashes between ninja, about the domination of criminals like Akatsuki's members, about anybody who claimed for peace inflicting pain on others. I couldn't say that such a world was better. So, I only answered: «I'm sorry. I'm not aware of the situation and I said a foolish thing.»

Reishi shook his head. «No, I'm the one that needs to be excused for Kina's behaviour.»

The small teapot exhaled a light steam.

In that long and clear autumnal night, I had the feeling that all my worries had vanished. Or at least, nothing was troubling me.

«It's just my humble opinion, but I think that the ninja world is coming to an end. Their abilities will be replaced by new techniques and one day this world will turn into a place that we can't even imagine.»

The wind coming from the porch prompted the silvergrass in the tokonoma vase to swing.

«Just like what happened with the blue explosive powder?»

Reishi wet his throat with tea, then proceeded: «Exactly. In the first place, the blue explosive powder was created by accident, in an attempt to create an elixir of long life capable of curing any kind of disease. The Kumanoi clan mixed that substance with potassium nitrate, sulphur and charcoal, increasing its explosive power.»

«They wanted to create a medicament for eternal life, but ironically they obtained a murderous instrument instead.» I said.

«A ninja's training course is very hard and there are even pupils that lose their life during training. For this reason not everyone is apt to be a ninja. Even after the end of the training course, they know they could die while carrying out a mission. They see death with their very eyes, but it's thanks to all this that they're able to perfectly master techniques that no one is able to copy.» continued Reishi.

«Yeah.»

«However, that's exactly where the problem lies.»

«?»

«Ten years ago, when the public opinion of the village split into two opposite parties about the matter of neutrality, a unpleasant event with Amegakure occurred. Coming to know that plants used for the creation of hallucinogens grew on the Three Wolves mountain range, some shinobi coming from that village stole into our country in order to take possession of it.»

«I don't know much about Amegakure, but I heard that there are a lot of people who use genjutsu.»

«The Village of the Wolf's Awakening and the Village of the Wolf's Nourishment quickly fell under their control and soon after they came after us. You probably already know that, but there weren't noteworthy ninja in our village and we were inferior to the other villages in terms of abilities. In spite of this, we managed to defeat Amegakure.

Which do you think was the reason?»

«The blue explosive powder?»

Reshi nodded and said: «Exactly. In order to use the powder in battle, the Kumanoi clan created the greater cylinder and the smaller one, along with sky-dropped and land mines. Their use is very simple: you blow inside them or you place them underground.

Yearslong training is not needed, as it is for ninjutsu. Even children can use these weapons without problems.»

I understood where he was getting at.

«In other words, it means that if a ninja dies, nobody is able to use his technique, while that sort of instruments can be used by anyone.» I said.

«We weren't capable of rivalling Amegakure's ninja individually for sure. However a battle is a team play. A ninjutsu instead is unique and as such it can't be replaced. If that ninja is defeated, the strength of the whole team vanishes in a heartbeat. In our case, on the contrary, the loss of a single individual doesn't affect the collective power in the slightest.»

«So it's in this way that you defeated Amegakure. Is this the reason why you think the ninja world is fated to end?»

«Yeah.»

«When you talk like that, however, it seems that you don't want it to end. Why? It would also mean the end of bloodsheds.»

Reshi stopped to think for a moment, then he went straight to the point: «Bloodsheds would not end.»

«What do you mean?»

«After the victory against Amegakure, many of its ninja were taken as captives.»

He was panting: it seemed that the past was resurfacing in his mind, even making him forget to blink.

After a small pause, he resumed talking: «Those from the Kumanoi clan brought them on the Landmines Field.»

«Landmines Field?»

«Landmines are hidden in the ground. They're full of slightly moistened blue explosive powder on their inside. They're made in a way that they explode when a pressure is exerted on them. Since the pressure trigger can be established beforehand, if a child accidentally tramples on them the explosion isn't triggered because the weight is negligible. They say that their power is equal to several explosive tags'. In view of Amegakure's attack, many of them were buried in along the perimeter of our country.

The men of the Kumanoi clan forced the prisoners to walk over them, while the field was surrounded by men armed with cylinders.

I was only seven at that time and what I saw remained engraved on my mind in an everlasting way. The prisoners who tried to flee were shot with the cylinders. The others, forced to step on the landmines, blew up one after another. Every time a landmine exploded, gleeful shouts burst out.»

His eyes were filled with rage and he was gasping for breath.

«Reishi...»

«After the battle the villagers were elated. Blood flowed everywhere and a severed hand landed next to me. They were laughing, everyone was laughing!»

«Reishi, calm down.»

«My father wasn't wrong. Before that terrible sight, everyone was laughing. What for? Is it so funny to see someone die?!»

«Enough! I understood! Reishi, calm down!» I shouted, grabbing him by the shoulders. Reishi widened his eyes. For a moment he had completely forgotten who and where he was. He opened his mouth and looked at me in confusion. Then he blinked several times to come to his senses.

«Are you all right?»

«I-I'm sorry. I apologise for my behaviour.» he told me, tidying his long hair and sitting down straight.

«Don't worry, you're not the only one in shreds.»

I would have liked to open my heart to him about Itachi. Until what point would it help me? How much would my heart feel relieved? I would have liked to be told that I wasn't completely alone, that I wasn't committing mistakes.

However I was not able to.

Words got stuck in my throat, as if a curse was preventing me from talking.

I realised that, after mistaking so many times, I didn't care anymore. The mistakes I made had led me to be alone and I was aware of the fact that, by keeping mistaking, I would never escape solitude. I had the sensation that if the ninja world was destined to end, I could end it myself.

As a start, I could burn the Leaf into ashes.

I felt that the black flames, subsided upon my arrival in the village, were starting to burn again inside me.

«This village wasn't ready to use the blue explosive powder yet. Things have changed too quickly and nobody managed to keep up. In seeing the mines blowing up, the villagers clapped their hands and made a din just like kids. My father just wanted to slow down this change...»

When I got up, Reishi stopped.

«I don't give a damn about your family.»

«Sasuke?»

«You and the villagers are just the same.»

«!»

«Between a moan and a laugh, you are sitting on the blue explosive powder enjoying these times of peace. Your condition will never change.»

«You're wrong! My father did something! He used Roen to make the villagers understand that they couldn't rely on that powder alone!»

«Then the fact that your father freed that monster from its seal is not only a rumour. If things are like this, Kina's attitude is understandable.»

«What do you know? A ninja kills, and this is a fact. Even if I'm not much worthy, I'm a ninja, too, and I know very well that sometimes it's the only choice. However, a shinobi never forget the lives he has taken.» said Reishi with a trembling voice.

Itachi's words once again echoed in my head: «Forgive me, Sasuke. This is the last time.»

«Even if it caused so many deaths, nobody remembers about the blue powder massacre. If you steal someone else's life to save your own, you should never forget about it: this is what my father was trying to tell everyone, without being successful.» said Reishi, on the verge of tears.

«If it weren't for the blue explosive powder, you would have been killed.»

«!»

«Assuming you're okay with it, what about Kina? He was just a newborn child at the time. The thought that he would have been killed by Amegakure's shinobi doesn't upset you at all?»

Reishi didn't answer. He kept his head bowed down.

I walked out in the garden, leaving the Hypericum's Shrine behind me. I climbed the stone staircase with the sounds of the bugs following me and I went back to the shrine. I walked inside the fence and I lay down on my back.

Probably the ninja world was really destined to end. Looking at the sky through the opening on the roof, I found myself thinking disjointed thoughts. Humans were capable of doing anything in order to survive. Having used Itachi to kill the clan was a trifle in comparison.

From that time on, the blue explosive powder would become more and more necessary, it would protect more and more people but, above all, it would keep breaking human lives, until the end of the world.

4

That very night, right near the Mausoleum of the Thorny Mount, the seventh murder occurred. I heard about that from Kina the next day.

At the height of excitement, he shouted at the top of his voice grabbing me by my arm:

«And that's not all! The victims are those three from the other night! The gang of the guy you hit! People say that the culprit is the one who threw the kunai!»

«That would make me the murderer. I'm going giving myself up.» I said.

I walked across the shrine's garden and went under the torii with an onigiri in my mouth.

Kina ran after me. «Wait, Sasuke! Where are you going?»

«I discovered several things about Itachi. The time has come to leave this village.»

«But your medicament isn't ready yet!»

«My eyes are doing fine these days.»

«More like, why don't we try and give a look to the murder scene?»

I stopped, stared at him motionless and repeated: «More like?»

«Come on, come on! Let's go!»

«Are you deaf? I'm...»

«You're leaving, I got it. No problem, I'm not gonna stop you. But, since it's on the way, let's drop by the mausoleum!»

«Hear me out, you moron. If I hadn't come and stopped those three last night, you probably would have died.» I said, poking his forehead.

Kina winced. «Too bad. It was really a good opportunity.»

«A good opportunity for what? Becoming a withered corpse?»

After bickering for a while, we headed towards the mausoleum.

5

When we arrived, the police had already left the crime scene.

Drowsing under the daylight, the village's founders' tombstone had a whole different appearance: the row of oaks that looked like a skeletal hand during the night was smoothly filtering the sunrays through its branches.

A group of men stuck out before our eyes. They overcrowded in front of the tomb where I scared away those three rogues the night before.

I sensed Kina's nervousness, who was walking next to me.

«The man in a black kimono, on the front, is Jiryū Sendō. They all gathered here today because the murdered men belonged to their clan.» Kina told me adjusting his mask, as to conceal his weakness.

The man he had showed me was more or less in his forties and he was wearing a black kimono with a white dragon wrapped around the hem. His head was shaved and his moustache had noticeable shades of white.

His followers looked nothing like honest people, and some of them were wearing a jacket on their shoulders, with the huge symbol of their clan drawn on the back.

They were staring at us motionless.

We, for our part, didn't turn our eyes away.

I recognised in the man that was whispering something in Jiryū Sendō's ear the drug dealer with a scar on his cheek who had sold me the fake Kotarō.

Kina and I walked forward until we came face to face with those men.

The wind made the grass, the tree leaves and the hem of their kimono sway.

A total silence reigned over the graveyard.

Those criminals limited themselves to staring at us, as to make us understand that there was no way out.

No one breathed a word.

At that point I was the one to break the ice: «Get lost.»

The members of the gang got angry, but Jiryū managed to keep them under control.

«That's not a kind way to greet someone. So you are supposed to be the bodyguard that turned up at the Kodon's all of a sudden?» he said.

«Just as I thought! Then you're the one who set our house on fire!» shouted Kina in anger.

«Hey kid, you're falsely accusing me. Do you have any proof? You're blustering around, but under that hawk mask of yours you're already whimpering!»

A small smile surfaced on Jiryū's face, who shrugged making his underlings burst out laughing.

«I could smell a disgusting stink of rotten fish that night, the same stink you're reeking of now!» Kina answered back, without being outdone.

Jiryū Sendō's face contorted in a fearsome expression.

«What?! Try to say it again, stupid snotty kid!» he shouted, frantic.

«I'll say it how many times you like! You and your underlings stink in an awful way, you idiots!»

In response to those unacceptable insults, one of his underlings was about to dash towards Kina.

«Damn brat! Looks like you're too full of yourself!»

I blocked the man's legs, and he stumbled and fell on his face over a tombstone.

It was the starting sign.

The men dashed towards us, threatening us in every way.

«Aren't you being too cocky?»

«I kill you!»

«Let's give him a good lesson!»

Kina and I tried to avoid the kunai and the shuriken that were thrown at us from every direction.

When we were playing detectives, I already had the opportunity to observe Kina's agility: unless he hurled himself straight against his opponent, they had no chance to get him.

And even if they managed to hit him, he would only get a few scratches and surely it would serve as a good medicine for his recklessness.

However I decided to swiftly defeat all opponents, conscious of the fact that if that boy were to get hurt seriously, I would have really bad dreams.

I inhaled deeply.

«Fire Release: Great Dragon Fire Technique!»

I blew fire against the enemies: in a second, the three men that were running on front became human torches.

A scream of pain echoed in the graveyard: «Whaaa! Heelp!»

The leftovers scattered everywhere and, panicking, they began clashing against each other.

Jiryū Sendō was screaming like a hen: «What the hell are you doing?! Do you want to be overcome by a brat? Come on, that fir-» anyway, he suddenly held his breath and the end of the sentence with it.

«W-wait, don't be hasty. L-let's talk for a moment...»

I had moved behind his back and was holding a kunai against his neck. «I'll only say it once again: get lost.»

«W-who the hell are you?»

«Sasuke Uchiha.»

«!»

«Apparently my name isn't new to you.»

Jiryū's followers, that were struggling to keep up with him, pulled out some small cylinders and brought them to their mouths.

«They're smaller cylinders! Be careful! If a rock hits you, you're dead!» shouted Kina.

A gentle pressure with my kunai was enough to draw a trickle of blood from Jiryū Sendō's neck.

«Whoa! Put immediately that thing down! Are you going to kill me?!» he exclaimed, bouncing in shock.

«Tell them to throw away their weapons.»

«A-are you deaf?! Throw away your weapons immediately, you good-for-nothings!»

His underlings obeyed.

«It looks like my brother Itachi has been way too much tolerant towards you.»
Jiryū nodded vigorously, sweating profusely. «Sure! Itachi did so much for us...»
The other just kept observing the scene from afar, speechless.
«I'm not as good as my brother at treating people with respect. Listen carefully: don't try to come near the Hypericum's Shrine again, otherwise I'll deal with you.» I said, kicking his rear.
The men fled like whipped dogs, but Kina kept throwing rocks at them. «Get it into your thick skulls! Don't ever come back!»
I thought that probably it wouldn't end there. After all even scoundrels had their pride. But what could I do? I wanted to leave the village that same day.
The only way I could be useful was by playing detectives with Kina a little longer. I felt relieved and decided to patrol the murder scene.
The little flags struck into the ground must have pointed out the spot in which the corpses were found: one on a bush, one near the tombstone and one on the near riverside.
«This could be the blood of the man that was struck by the kunai.» Kina told me.
In fact there was a bloodstain on the stone.
Kina sniffed everywhere like a dog, studied the symbols written on the tombstone one by one, crawled on the ground to verify any presence of footprints and climbed on the oaks. I was going to examine that bloodstain, but when I tried to kneel down I suddenly felt my eyes throbbing.
Within few instants a sharp pain spread from my eye sockets, causing my eyeballs to tremble.
What the hell was happening?
I raised both my hands to cover my eyes, which were throbbing violently by then. My field of vision distorted and I instinctively grabbed the tombstone not to fall. The intensity of the vibrations did nothing but increase: it was just as if my eyes were trying to tell me something.
The mangekyō sharingan activates itself with the killing of a loved one.
I did a mind calculation: twenty two days had passed since Itachi's death. That pain was due to the activation of the mangekyō sharingan in my eyes. The death of a loved one.
And yet I had hated him with all my heart until a moment before he had died. At that moment, under the pouring rain, I was even happy for Itachi's death. If what Madara had asserted was true, Itachi had given me the mangekyō sharingan by letting me defeat him.
The death of a loved one, of someone I loved.
Itachi had been able to see what was invisible to my eyes, blinded by hatred. That's why I was chosen by the mangekyō sharingan.
What should I have done?
Was he asking me to become the Leaf's defender?
Was this what he wished for from the bottom of his heart?
However if I hadn't managed to understand what was concealed deep within my heart, probably he wasn't able to read his heart either.
Was he really okay with something like that?
We had to protect the Leaf even at the cost of sacrificing our clan?
I didn't want this. Not such an ending.

The thing I wanted...

The black flames were swallowing my heart.

«Sasuke, are you feeling well?» Kina asked me, putting his hand on my shoulder.

«Don't touch me or I kill you!» I threatened him, roughly sending him away.

«Sasuke?»

«I've had enough of you, your brother and this village.»

But more than anything else, I was tired of myself.

«We are done playing detectives.» I said.

I stood up and tried to wipe my eyes, when I noticed some blood in my hands. As murky water that suddenly becomes crystal clear, my vision cleared, letting me neatly discern every thing.

Entirely similar to a candle that burns with an outmost strength before it goes out completely, I felt on the verge of being burned to ashes too.

My heart was burning enveloped in Amaterasu's flames.

«Sasuke? Let's go back home. We'll tell my brother to prepare your eye drops immediately.»

«Mind your own business!» I shouted, shoving him away.

At that moment something happened.

I can't tell if it was due to the newly-activated mangekyō sharingan, or if it was a mere coincidence. Anyway, the moment I pushed Kina away, I saw it.

I picked up that object from inside the bush. I didn't know what to think.

«Why? Why is this here?»

«S-sasuke? Is everything fine?»

Fallen on his bottom, Kina was looking at me astounded, amused and upset at the same time. That kid was sincerely worried about me.

It meant, therefore, that not every people in the world wanted to take advantage of me.

That thought convinced me, making me feel relieved.

The black flames that were burning my heart started to lose their intensity and became weaker and weaker, until they vanished along with a pleasant autumnal breeze.

I put what I had picked up in my pocket and reached out my hand to Kina.

«I'm sorry.»

«Sasuke...»

«Come on, let's go.»

Kina grabbed my hand, pulled himself up with all his strength and took advantage of the push to poke my forehead.

I ran my hand over the spot he had poked.

«He he he! I forgive you only this time, you moron!» he told me, smiling.

I instinctively lowered my eyes. «You fool. I'm hungry, why don't we eat something?»

«Okay!»

We stopped by the gloomy stall next to the graveyard and we took some dango anything but appetising.

Kina and Reishi were doing their best, despite the fact that the whole village was against them. Only the two of them were left: the elder and the younger brother. I came to the same conclusion once again.

I would never be able to hate them.

I was striving for that relationship of theirs. It couldn't be otherwise.

Kina took another dish of those terrible dango and filled his mouth with them, as if they were delicious.

It had been a nice afternoon after all.

Naruto: Chronicles of the Thunderclap
The day of the wolf's cry

Chapter 4: The kidnapping

1

I kept monitoring the situation. This, however, didn't imply that I was looking after Kina as well.

After five days things took an unexpected turn: Reishi got hurt and was brought to the hospital. To be fair, I carried him there.

He had gone to the mountain to pick some medicinal herbs, when he was shot by a long cylinder.

I had observed the whole scene from a treetop, I knew it hadn't been a mistake.

Reishi was picking up plants and flowers that looked nothing but weeds to me. He put them in his mouth, he chewed them, he smelt them and then he wrote down something in a small logbook. At one point he dug into the ground to pick a nasty looking bug.

In this way, he advanced more and more towards the mountain.

Two hunters were resting at the feet of a big cedar. The deer they had just caught was lying next to them.

I managed to hear Reishi's voice as he greeted them.

The hunters greeted him back with a nod and followed him with their eyes as he was walking off collecting flowers and insects.

After that they whispered something, and while one of them pointed to Reishi's back, the other took a cylinder to his mouth aiming undoubtedly straight for him.

I immediately threw a kunai, which pierced the cylinder making the man's hand tremble.

The most violent noise of the explosion echoed through the forest.

The stones managed to hit Reishi's feet while he was climbing a cliff. The rocks crumbled, making him fall for eighteen metres (sixty feet) or so, down to a creek bed covered in colourful flowers.

«I already asked this to Reishi. Why don't you leave this village?»

Kina didn't answer. He was sitting on the hospital bench, his eyes were opened wide as a doll's and he quivered from time to time.

He hadn't sustained serious injuries: just a light brain concussion had been diagnosed to him.

The doctors told Reishi that it would be better to spend a night in the hospital to monitor his situation, but he adamantly decided to leave.

In front of such a stubborn attitude, even the doctors whispered something: «If the Kodon are so keen on dying, then they can go ahead.»

I don't know why, but that night the bugs were particularly noisy. Shogun fireflies fluttered around, twirling here and there.

It was almost past midnight when Reishi sneaked out of home. First of all he turned his head from side to side, as to sniff the air. Then with a dextrous leap he jumped in top of a telegraph pole and once again he seemed intent on reading the wind. The second after he dashed to the forest, jumped over the treetops, ran on the ground and got over the river with a leap.

That agility belonged to a man who had meticulously apprehended the art of ninja.

I followed him, keeping my distances.
Some time before, Kina had showed me that zone on a map of the village. If memory didn't fail me, Reishi was heading towards the Lake of the Cape Jasmines.
I was right: some white double-flowered jasmines had grown on the lakeshore.
I couldn't help but notice I was in a southern land. In Konohagakure the season of those flowers had ended for a while now.
The place was surrounded by a sweet floral scent.
I remembered what Shikamaru had told me once: since its fruit doesn't unfold even after its maturity, the jasmine is also known by the name of "mouthless jasmine". Ah, right!
The extract of that flower was used as an anti-inflammatory, antipyretic and detoxifier.
The scent was so intense that it made my head spin, and because of the haze that shrouded the lake surface, I lost sight of my target.
I had a fit of huff and for a while I didn't know what to do.
On the water surface only the blurred light of the insects could be distinguished.
How much time had passed? Maybe five or ten minutes.
Probably I would have given up and gone back, if I hadn't heard a scream break the silence.
My body moved on his own and started running, cleaving the fog.
A human-like silhouette started to emerge little by little.
Shogun fireflies flew everywhere in confusion. The only thing I could see clearly was their green light.
The undefined silhouette in the distance had a curved body, it was carrying a sort of big sack on its shoulders and jumping on the tree branches it was coming towards me.
I hid in the shadow of a tree and concealed my presence completely.
The instant the swirl of fog that was enfolding him dissipated, Reishi's silhouette clearly appeared in front of my eyes.
He wasn't emanating even a pinch of his usual artificial tranquillity. His eyes were cool and clear, like the tip of a blade.
My eyes followed Reishi's figure while he left, sinking again through the fog.
After that I headed towards the spot where he was standing shortly before.
Two mummified corpses were lying on the ground.
They were both wearing fishing outfits, but it was clear that they were the two men that had shot Reishi on the mountain. The fishes inside the basket were still making great jumps.
I didn't feel rage, nor even sadness nor pity: the feeling I got while looking at those bodies was only sympathy.
It was a pleasant feeling.
It seemed that the haze on the lakeshore was thickening more and more as to protect guys like Reishi and me.
«Fu fu fu!»
I thought he was right and I couldn't hold back a laughter. He should have killed the villager that had mocked him and Kina one by one.
Only the fireflies with their green light heard my laughter echoing through the lakeshores.

As I imagined, the next day Kina rushed over to me and he told me breathless what I already knew.

«Some new corpses have been found!»

To avoid misunderstandings, I told him clearly: «Listen, Kina. Your brother is right. Stop playing this dangerous game at once.»

«W-what's got into you all of a sudden?! Do you think I'm playing around?» he said with a grimace.

«I won't help you anymore.»

«Why?»

«I stayed for too long. Your brother is focusing in his duties, and it's only right that I get ready to go back where I come from.»

«And where are you supposed to come from?»

«Ah, well... let's say that cape jasmines don't bloom in that place.»

Kina peered at me intently.

«What's up with you?» I asked him.

«Why cape jasmines? I don't think I told you that the murders occurred at the Lake of the Cape Jasmines.»

«...»

«How do you know?»

«It doesn't matter.»

I was about to poke his forehead, but he quickly leapt back and kept looking at me with wariness.

At that point I sighed, I picked up a stone and pointed at the beech that was swaying in the wind.

«Can you see the leaf at the top of the highest branch? The one that has been lightly gnawed by the bugs?»

Kina turned to look.

I threw the stone and I made the leaf I aimed at fall onto the ground.

«Wow! Great!» he exclaimed dumbfounded.

«However weak the ninja in this village might be, they're surely able to do something like that. If you want to keep playing detectives, learn how to do at least this, or else you'll never manage to catch the culprit.»

«The ninja in this village are just scum! I will never ask you anything again!» shouted Kina disdainfully.

Then he put on his hawk mask and began running.

«I'll show you that I'm capable of catching the murderer all by myself!» with those words, he disappeared in the distance.

Passing through the small shrine, I went down the stone stairway and I went through the gate of the Hypericum's Shrine. I tried to call him, but I got no response.

I glanced around the garden. Reishi was preparing an infusion of medicinal herbs in a pot. When he saw me pop out of nowhere, he was slightly surprised.

«It smells good! Are you brewing a medicament?» I asked him.

«No. I'm extracting a perfume from some insects called "shogun fireflies".» he answered me, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

«Kina told me about that. It seems that only female specimens are needed.»

«Yes, but if you don't mix it with other medicinal plants, the one that uses it ends up finding himself with a swarm of males on him.»

«Do you sell it?»

«Here at the Hypericum's Shrine, we don't. But the other merchants secretly come and buy it here at our place.» answered Reishi without much enthusiasm.

«Then they sell it pretending they made it in their own shop?»

«These insects are also the main ingredient for cough syrups.»

«How do they taste like?»

«They're so bitter that they leave you with a bad taste in your mouth, in the true sense of the word! Ha, ha, ha!»

«...»

«Er... It means that they're particularly bitter and...»

«I know that saying.»

«Ahem... Ah... right! I finally finished making the eye drops.»

«I don't need it anymore.»

«...»

«I'm going to leave this village today.»

Reishi, who was stirring the pot's content with a wooden spatula, halted his hand and turned to me.

«Kina came to me before and told me about yesterday night murder.» I said.

His eyes betrayed a sign of worry.

«I came here to thank you and to give you back this.»

I pulled the waxed paper bag out of my pocket.

Reishi went pale and was surrounded by a dark and ominous atmosphere.

«I picked it up at the Mausoleum of the Thorny Mount when the corpses were found. It's the bag that contained the fake Kotarō I bought upon my arrival in this village. The time and place of the purchase are written in your handwriting. Don't worry: I told no one.» I said, handing him the bag.

Reishi held his breath for a while, then he said: «Then it wasn't a coincidence that you were the one that helped me yesterday.»

«No. I had followed you.»

«Yesterday night as well?»

«Yeah.»

«What for?»

«Nothing.»

«Nothing?»

«If you insist, let's say it's because I don't want you to be caught. That's all.»

«Why?»

«Well, maybe because I understand your disposition.» I answered, shrugging.

«My disposition?»

«Yes. If you hadn't done it, you would have destroyed yourself. Although you hate this village to death, you've always been enduring for Kina. The guys you killed yesterday are the ones that attacked you on the mountain, and I bet that all the people you killed until now had done something horrible to you or to your brother.» I said.

Reishi was keeping his head bowed and his shoulders started trembling. I thought he was crying at first, but I was wrong.

«Fu, fu, fu... Ha, ha, ha!»

A chill went down my spine. His laughter was identical to the one I made resound through the lakeshore the night before.

I found myself wandering with my mind. Even if I had respected Itachi's will, I would never have been able to forgive the Leaf. I would have endured countless times for the village's well being, but in the end I would have been destroyed by it, just like Reishi. I would have pretended to be one of them and, probably, every night I would have killed someone.

Reishi's laughter became fainter and fainter, until it was replaced by a deep silence.

Inside the pot, the perfume was boiling on a low heat.

«The name of our shop comes from a medicinal herb used as haemostatic and mouthwash. The hypericum, however, is also known by the name of "fratricidal grass".»

«For what reason?»

Regaining his composure, Reishi began talking peacefully «There's a legend about it. A long time ago lived a falconer named Haruyori. Nobody matched for his mastery of hawks and his skills looked in all respects superior to human abilities. When it happened that a hawk was injured, he readily gave it a medicinal herb, healing it in an instant. Despite he was often asked for information about that wonderful plant, he didn't tell anybody. One day, however, his younger brother inadvertently revealed the secret that he was keeping so jealously to himself. Haruyori went on a rampage and, mad with fury, killed him with a single hit of his sword. His brother's blood spilled over the leaves of the plant, making small black dots. That's why hypericum leaves are studded with dark dots.»

I thought about that story for a while and asked: «Why did the younger brother reveal the secret?»

«Out of love.»

«Love?»

«The person he confided in was the daughter of Haruyori's rival falconer. He was bound with her by a love relationship.»

«What a tragic story.»

«My father told me about it a long time ago. He used to say that a hawk was chosen for the Anbu mask for this legend to become a lesson for everyone.»

«Traitors are not to be forgiven, no matter what their reasons may be. Is this what he meant?»

«Sometimes I happen to think about it. I don't doubt that that man was attracted by the charm of a woman, but why did he betray his brother? And yet he knew how much he cared about that plant.»

I waited silently.

«I wonder if his wasn't an attempt to surpass him. That's why I named our shop "Hypericum's Shrine". The day will come when Kina will try to surpass me. For me to be able to support him firmly when that moment comes, for not to hinder him, for make me a brother with a clear perception of his needs. For all these reasons, I... Sasuke, you're making a mistake.»

I didn't understand. After a long moment of hesitation, Reishi raised his head, as if he had decided to tell me the truth.

However it was impossible for him to continue.

At the sound of something cleaving the air, I promptly bent my back backwards.
An object brushed the tip of my nose.
I turned and saw an arrow stuck in the door of the main building. Reishi threw a shuriken, but he only hit the shape of a man in the distance, after that he rushed to pull out the arrow and he opened the letter that was affixed to it.
He frowned deeply.
Here's what was written on it: "We have your little brother. If you want him to return safe and sound, come at the Landmines Field and bring the Kotarō's recipe with you".
There wasn't the addresser's name on it, but we knew immediately that it was Jiryū Sendō's work.
«Let's go. What's with that vacant expression?» I told Reishi, giving him a pat on his shoulder.
«You are nothing to do with this. I'll go alone.»
«Stop being difficult!»
«You can't come!»
«It'll be better with the two of us.»
«I'll go alone! Don't follow me, please.» said Reishi firmly.
That strong opposition aroused my suspicion.
«You didn't understand anything. Kina... Kina is... Anyway, don't follow me, for no reason.» he reiterated.
«I do as I please. Kina owes me several dishes of onigiri. He needs to pay off his debt.» I said.

3

The Landmines Field was the wide fallow where the Amegakure ninja massacre had happened long time ago.
Lightened by the setting sun, the silvergrass shone in a bright red.
Several pools, born perhaps from the landmine explosions, shimmered in the sun, reflecting the pink clouds.
Reishi and I stood still in that field covered in silvergrass.
I couldn't believe the scene that showed itself in front of my eyes.
At sunset the sky dyed completely in red.
Reishi was right, I hadn't understood anything. The reason for his sudden laughter when I told him he was the culprit of the murders, what he wanted to tell me with the legend of the fratricidal grass and in the end the reason for which he insisted in telling me not to follow him: I hadn't understood anything at all.
A strong wind started blowing, the sea of silvergrass started waving and the corpses rolled over as dried ears of rice.
The Landmines Field was strewn with plants, pools, resentful spirits of murdered shinobi and several mummified corpses.
They were certainly several dozens.
On the back of those corpses that were lying on the ground, the symbol of the Sendō clan fluttered in the wind.
I looked around me. «Where's Kina?»
I thoroughly scanned the place, but I didn't see him.
I didn't know what to think.

Without minding me, Reishi pulled a small jar out of his pocket and he unscrewed the cap: a large amount of shogun fireflies came out of it, and they take flight emanating their characteristic green light.

«This way.» he said.

Not understanding what was happening, I followed Reishi after those luminous insects. Once we crossed the field, we found ourselves surrounded by the deep darkness of the forest.

It seemed that the insects knew exactly where they had to go.

As we advanced through the trees, the green light enfolded us more and more.

«Kina!» I shouted.

He was lying on the ground at the feet of a huge cedar.

Reishi hurried towards him, sending away the shogun fireflies that were surrounding him.

The moment after, however, the insects went back to flying around him.

Nearby, something was emanating a particularly bright light from the ground. I got closer and picked up the hawk mask.

«Hey, Reishi. What the hell does it me-»

When I turned around, the words died in my throat.

A pale purple coloured smoke was coming from Reishi's mouth.

A scent went through my nose, and I identified the same inebriating scent that the cape jasmines were exhaling the night before.

Kina was inhaling that substance from his mouth and nose.

Reishi quickly positioned his hands.

«Spiritual Communication of the Tiger and the Wolf!»

Struck in several parts of his body, Kina's chest startled.

Reishi uttered an incantation, staring at his brother's wide-open eyes. As he worded them, those words reminded me of a lullaby.

Kina's eyelids slowly began to close. Reishi kept reciting the incantation until they were locked shut, after that he put his brother in a big sack and shouldered it.

«Hey, what are you doing?»

«We'll talk later.»

Reishi pointed outside the forest with his chin. At that moment I heard some voices coming from the Landmines Field. The faint shouting soon got lost in the wind, but it seemed that someone was in turmoil.

Probably the corpses had been found.

With his brothers on his shoulders, Reishi jumped and reached a treetop.

Insects quickly gathered around Kina's mask.

When I went by his side, Reishi told me: «That mask is soaked with the scent of the female specimens of these insects. It's a way to find Kina at any time.»

«What did you do to him just now?»

«I hypnotised him. When he wakes up, he'll have forgotten everything.»

«Then it was Kina to commit those murders?»

Reishi didn't answer, he just kept his eyes focused in front of him.

I was really an idiot!

I had jumped to conclusion by myself and felt an arbitrary sense of solidarity towards Reishi, trying to share a selfish daydream of mine with him.

«Every human being lives his life bounded by his own knowledge and his own experience, which he wrongly names reality. It's possible that your reality is nothing but a mirage.»

Itachi had told me these words during our last fight.

Ah, Itachi. It really seemed that, once again, he was right. I couldn't distinguish reality from mirage anymore.

Reishi's words also came to my mind: «I wonder if his wasn't an attempt to surpass him.»

The fratricidal grass, soaked in the younger brother's blood, was always blooming inside his heart: as an everlasting curse, it served as a reminder to prevent him from killing Kina.

«For me to be able to support him firmly when that moment comes, for not to hinder him, for make me a brother with a clear perception of his needs.»

In which way would I be able to surpass Itachi?

How could I manage to endure the pain that was tearing my chest apart?

For the first time, Reishi's back looked big in front of my eyes and overlapped with Itachi's.

Going on in that way, Reishi had been always protecting his brother. Even if he had been derided by Kina and considered a coward by the villagers, he had stuck assiduously to his duties, just as when he patiently boiled medicinal herbs, that he cooked until its broth vanished.

No words of thanks for that young man that had always concealed his nature, without being treated with respect not even by the person in the world he loved the most.

Nevertheless, Reishi told me these words: «Sasuke, I beg you. Don't say anything to Kina.»

He and Itachi were really identical.

«Okay. Don't worry.» I answered.

From behind his shoulders, I had the feeling that he was smiling.

4

When we arrived at the Hypericum's Shrine, Reishi put Kina to sleep in his room and joined me in the room with the wooden floor. His face looked overwhelmed with fatigue, but his expression had returned calm as usual.

«Take this. It's ready.» he said, handing me the eye drops. Even without listening to his words, I immediately put the medicament on.

«I was about to tell you to use it with caution because it can cause headache, nausea, blurred and low vision.»

My sight became crystal clear and the pain subsided quickly.

While I was wiping my eyes, I approached the subject again: «The thing I don't understand is how Kina manages to absorb chakra.»

Before opening his mouth, Reishi stared at me motionless.

«You should know.» he said then.

We exchanged a glance.

«You're right, I can figure it out. Kina didn't learn ninjutsu, he doesn't give out the impression to have received assassination training. Could it be that there's something sealed inside his body?»

«Exactly.»

«Yet there's a thing that doesn't convince me.»

«The fact that he doesn't have a seal in his body?»

«The first time I saw him, the night of the fire, he was barechested.»

«Come.»

I followed him in Kina's room. The kid was sleeping inside his futon and was breathing calmly.

Reishi knelt next to the pillow and parted his hair with his hands.

«Now I see. The seal is in his head.» I said.

Reishi gently wiped the sweat from Kina's forehead. «We already talked about the fact that my father undid Rōen's seal. You see, that creature had always been sealed inside the Kodon Shrine. My father was capable of controlling it perfectly through the hypnotic genjutsu of the Spiritual Communication of the Tiger and the Wolf. Rōen was in a complete hypnotic state.»

I listened in silence, while Reishi accommodated his brother's fringe with his hands.

«My father just wanted it to serve as a lesson for the villagers, persuaded that the blue explosive powder was a foolproof means for self defence. At that time, the only existing weapons that made use of the powder were the smaller and long cylinders. There were also the landmines, but my father knew exactly where they were buried. With only those weapons available, it was unlikely that his opponents would manage to break the Spiritual Communication of the Tiger and the Wolf.»

«Was there a further unforeseen weapon?»

«The Kumanoi clan had secretly created the greater cylinder, a weapon that used an amount of blue explosive powder dozen of times higher than the one of the smaller cylinder, and it was able to throw actual rocks. The guards decided to use Rōen as a testing ground for the use of that new weapon. The result was that...»

«The effect of the hypnotic genjutsu vanished and the creature went out of control. Am I right?»

«My mother and my father, that were already drained from their chakra, tried to restore the Spiritual Communication of the Tiger and the Wolf, trying somehow to seal Rōen in the Kodon Shrine. However, sacrificing their lives, they only managed to seal it in Kina's body.»

«Rōen lives inside Kina's body?»

«In our clan there is a sealing technique for Rōen, called Rōen Kodon precisely.»

Reishi lowered his eyes on Kina's face and, stroking his head gently, he started to narrate.

«In ancient times, a creature called Rōen appeared on the Three Wolves from time to time, spreading panic. They say it was an old wolf, which had obtained an extraordinary magic power when he turned a thousand years old. He hadn't been classified as a tailed beast because it lacked intellect and was formed by instinct only. It was a monster that survived greedily sucking human chakra.

My forefathers sealed it inside the Kodon Shrine.

That day from ten years ago, when Rōen got out of their control, my mother and my father tried to seal him inside my body.

I was only ten. I remember that my body became so hot that it seemed it was about to burn, and the face of my father while he was desperately trying to use the technique is still impressed in my mind.

In the end my body didn't accepted Rōen and when I came to I found my parents dead. Kina was crying.

On that newborn child's head, still hairless, there was impressed the technique formula. The Kodons' blood that was flowing through my veins made me understand its meaning: before they exhaled their last breath, my parents had bestowed the Rōen Kodon upon me. In order to seal Rōen again in the Kodon Shrine, I had to free it from Kina's body and place the seal on his weak point, which was on his back. It was the only possible way. On his back, however, the body of the beast was full of tentacles that it used to suck chakra out of human beings and to protect his weak point.

When my father tried to seal Rōen again, he managed to control it with the Spiritual Communication of the Tiger and the Wolf and stopped its tentacles, leaving my mother free to use the Rōen Kodon.

If only that new weapon of the Kumanoi hadn't been there, probably everything would have gone in the right way.

Because of the greater cylinder, the technique stopped taking effect, and my mother hadn't finished to put the seal yet when she was seized by the tentacles.

That's how she died.

Left alone, my father couldn't certainly seal Rōen in the shrine.

Luckily, the Rōen Kodon that my mother wasn't able to complete slowed the beast's moves. If it hadn't gone like this, my father would have never been able to seal Rōen in Kina's body.

Can you see? With my strength alone, I would be captured by the beast's tentacles before I can reach its weak point.

And there's more: Rōen's chakra and Kina's chakra are linked together. If I freed the creature from the seal, it would absorb Kina's chakra.

Five minutes... No, Kina's strong: ten minutes, that's the time he would withstand.

If I weren't able to use the Rōen Kodon sealing technique and sever the bond between Kina and the beast within ten minutes, my brother would die.

I won't make it.

Keeping Kina with me, somehow I managed to make it through till today.

Only recently he started to sneak out at night.

One day he confessed me though his tears that he had killed a man. He said that when he came to he found a mummified corpse in front of him.

I'm not really good at tracking, that's why I soaked his mask with the scent of the shogun fireflies, so that they follow him everywhere.

You see, putting it in a bag like this, I always carry the powdered fragrance with me, and I spill it on his mask without Kina noticing. I discovered a mix of medicinal herbs capable of making it even more intense. So I just need to follow the light of the insects.

Kina has certainly killed some people, but just like a sleepwalker, he has always realised what happened only after he had woken up.

Sasuke, it's just as you're imagining: Kina is prompted to do those actions by Rōen.

However how can I explain such a thing to the villagers? My brother killed some people.

I'll never be able to change the facts. Furthermore, if they came to know that a monster is living inside his body, they would kill him, don't you think?

Lastly, his death would mean the release of Rōen that, yearning for chakra, would exterminate the whole village.

Kina assaults someone after an incident that makes him freak out: when he's ill treated by the villagers or when I get injured.

Probably in those moments a sort of opening forms inside his body, and Rōen manages to control him by forcefully merging into it.

My father once told me that the blue explosive powder would make ninja disappear from history. I thought that when their presence wouldn't be needed anymore, the training to become ninja would become useless too. That would mean the death of a great art, of a great spirit, because ninja training didn't fortify only the body, but the mind too.

The fact that Kina is exploited by Rōen is not only his own problem. All our hearts are weakening, little by little.

Once you asked me why haven't left the village yet, didn't you?»

I nodded.

«We've tried many times, but Kina always ended up coming back here. In a sort of somnambulism, he is continuously attracted to this place.

It may be that, just like a long thread, our mother's Rōen Kodon had bound the creature to the shrine.»

«So this is the reason.»

I placed myself on Reishi's place and I had the feeling I was being able to understand Itachi's feeling a little.

Turned towards Kina, Reishi's gaze was the one of a brother, of a father and of a mother. I heard a voice whispering something in my ear.

«Who's Itachi? For the Leaf, a good spy; for the Uchiha clan, a traitor; for Akatsuki, a disposable pawn. And then for you, Sasuke Uchiha...»

Reishi smiled slightly and said: «The only thing I can do is using hypnosis on him when he cries like hopeless baby. Every times he commits a homicide, I erase from his mind those terrible memories.»

The pain and the deep affection that were pervading his words were wiped away by the noise of a shattering glass.

Reishi and I turned back with a start.

Shattered in thousand pieces, the glass of the window lay glittering on the ground, totally similar to raindrops.

The mob was shoving to get to us, throwing stones as big as a fist against the windowpanes.

«Come outside, monsters! We know you are the murderers!» shouted someone from outside the Hypericum's Shrine.

Something stiffened in Reishi's body, giving him an awfully sad look. I sensed it clearly, almost as if I could physically touch it: his expressionless pupils were dry, but they appeared swollen with tears to my eyes.

«We'll have no mercy on you, Kodon brothers!»

«Come out, someone saw you!»

The shouts that arose from the outside sounded like they wanted to call out the beginning of a battle. I had the feeling that they were on the verge of merging in a vortex along with the endless noise of the shattered glass, before opening a hole in the wall, smashing the jars with the medicaments and destroying our souls.

I was about to dash outside, when Reishi shouted me to stop: «Sasuke, don't! If you go outside, it will be just like blowing on a fire!»

«Do you think this is the time to say something like that? If they go on like this, they'll manage to reach Kina!» I said, whirling my arm as to sweep everything away.

«I won't allow it.»

«But how?!»

Whilst the shouting violently perturbed the night sky, stones were incessantly flying against us. The interior of the room was completely ravaged.

«Change into Kina using the Transformation Technique.» he told me.

«?»

«I'll go outside to those people. It won't be a stroll and I'll probably be killed, but you will be the one to do it, Sasuke.»

«!»

«The elder brother will be beaten and he'll show up his true nature of demonic murder, but at that point the younger one will interfere and kill him. This is gonna be our plan. Maybe this way they will forgive at least Kina.» he explained to me.

Reishi was about to turn and leave, but I tried to grab his shoulder, shouting: «Wait, Reishi!»

It happened at that moment: my visual field was enveloped by white darkness.

I lost my balance, falling on the fireplace. A thick cloud of ashes rose in the room, seeping into my eyes, nose and mouth.

My pupils were cold, they seemed on the verge of freezing.

The white around me was growing more and more intense, and just like a glass that steams up because of the cold a light mist formed at the back of my eyes.

The only thing I managed to loosely distinguish was Reishi's silhouette from behind that was walking steadfast out of the room. I couldn't tell if it was due to my sight, but I didn't detect even the tiniest fragment of hesitation, regret or sadness in that picture.

Step by step, Reishi was going on steady, as if his destination was who knows which wonderful place: a field overflowing with blooming cape jasmines, a place where no one would harm Kina, a home where he and his brother could smile happily.

«Don't go, Reishi! I can defeat all those people by myself!» I shouted, covering my eyes with my hands.

Before going under the small curtain of the entrance door, Reishi turned around slightly: I thought I saw the hint of a smile in his mouth.

«Sasuke, probably you aren't seeing anything at this moment. Also Itachi underwent a temporary loss of vision the first time he used those eye drops. Don't worry: the clouding should disappear within tomorrow morning.»

While my sight was leaving quickly, my eyes saw once again the night in which Itachi had killed our parents. After I followed him, I had thrown a kunai at him, making his forehead protector fall on the ground. He had picked it up, put it on again and turned his back towards me.

The memories sunk in the depths of my body rose high up to my heart, just like a full moon that rises up in the sky. That night, Itachi was crying.

I could do nothing but follow with my eyes Reishi's silhouette that was being swallowed by a huge black shadow and, along with him, I saw Itachi's image dissolve into the darkness.

The shouting became stronger: «Here he is! He came out! Let's kill him!»
With my vision still bleary, I went out of the porch and jumped on the main building roof.

In front of the fence numerous gleaming dots were overlapping, probably due to torches. I didn't need to see him to tell that Reishi was in the middle of that angry mob. The picture of his figure kicked and pummelled like a dog went across my mind.

Reishi had always known that that moment would come, otherwise he wouldn't have been able to think out such a detailed strategy at once. He had also arranged hundreds of different plans, only in this way the smile on his lips could be explained.

Madara hadn't lied to me, at least regarding Itachi: the tears of that night, otherwise, would be inexplicable!

«These bastards killed some of our guys! Someone saw them! Hey, be careful not to miss the younger one!»

I recalled that amused voice. It belonged to Jiryū Sendō.

Whatever solution I had adopted, the end would have been hell anyway: if I had followed or not Reishi's plan, if I had done or not how Itachi said, the result would have been the same.

What could I do to save Reishi?

Was there a solution to prevent Kina's suffering?

And finally, how could I manage to remember Itachi with a smile?

«Okay, Reishi. I'll do as you please. I'll turn into Kina.» I mumbled, putting my hands in position.

«Stop!»

I turned towards the shadow that had dashed out from inside the house.

Kina was shouting with all his strength: «Stop that! Why are you hitting my brother?!

You'll pay for this!»

«D-don't come close, Kina! You have nothing to do with this! Go back inside!» shouted Reishi.

«Ha, ha, ha! This brat came out on his own like a bug throwing itself in a fire!» said Jiryū Sendō, dying with laughter.

The mob inflicted on Kina the same treatment they used with his brother.

Reishi blustered with rage: «Stop it! Leave him alone, I beg you! Kina has nothing to do with it! That's enough!»

Although I couldn't see most part of what was happening, I felt I could clearly distinguish Kina's figure taking injuries, mocked, being beaten till he puked and kicked by everyone.

The area in front of the gate was in the throes of confusion.

«Kill 'em! Don't forget what their parents did to us!» shouted Jiryū Sendō, spurring the mob.

Several lights similar to lanterns got into the alley that led to the Hypericum's Shrine.

«Police! What are you shouting for?! Get out of the way immediately and go back to your homes without making a fuss!»

«Are you kidding?! These two are the culprits of the latest homicide cases!» shouted the enraged mob.

«We'll take care of judging them! Now get lost, if you don't want to find yourself locked up for disturbing the peace!»

Beside themselves by then, the villagers attacked the police too.
It looked like a general brawl, people were fighting everywhere.
Everything was enveloped in a white mist.
The screams gathered in a vortex, swelling progressively.
As far as I tried to stare at the scene, I couldn't see anything but a white cluster.
Taking Reishi's screams as a reference, I leapt towards that direction, but I didn't land next to him: his body had already been swept away by the most violent shockwave of the explosion.
I did a rotation in mid-air, I changed my posture and landed on a treetop.
«What the-?!»
I didn't have a clue of what was going on.
The tree on which I was standing was the beech of the shrine. The Hypericum's Shrine was about fifty-five metres (180 feet) away: did it mean I had flown through such a wide area?
I turned to that direction and I sensed an evil chakra enveloping the house entirely.
The chaos from just before had left room for a deep silence.
«What's happening?»
I rubbed my eyes with my hands.
I sensed a very powerful black chakra, as big as a mountain, which was gradually growing in intensity.

Naruto: Chronicles of the Thunderclap

The day of the wolf's cry

Chapter 5: The memories in the eyes

1

Jiryū Sendō was the one who broke the silence: «A-a monster! It's Rōen! It's standing on his two feet!»

A rapid succession of shouting began.

«It must be fifteen metres (50 feet) tall!»

«What the hell are those silver tentacles on his back?»

«Look! A man has been taken! It's draining him completely!»

«The guards! Somebody call the guards!»

Rōen waved a paw and destroyed something with a loud roar.

«First squadron! Activate the smaller cylinders!»

The police's cylinders fired, but it seemed that the beast didn't even notice, neither his chakra suffered the slightest fluctuation.

«Graaawr!»

From the disorderly outburst of the cylinders, I understood that the policemen had been swept away by that violent roar.

«Waaah!»

«It won't do it! The smaller cylinder is useless!»

Rōen raised his face towards the moon and sent out a long howl: it seemed that he wanted to tell the world that the moment of his revenge had finally come.

The crowd was screaming in the throes of despair.

«Waaah! If they catch us, those tentacles will turn us into mummies!»

«L-let's run!»

The beast took a step ahead, making the earth shake.

«Nooo! Don't come near!»

The small chakra of the people disappeared, while the creature's one was growing more and more powerful.

«I don't wanna die!»

At first I thought it was chasing after the crowd, but observing the scene from the tree on the hill, I realised I was wrong: it was heading to the faint glinting of the village's lights.

«Does it want to get to the heart of the village?»

While it devoured whoever passed next to it, Rōen walked slowly, greedy for chakra.

I didn't have a clue of what was happening, but I jumped relying only on my hearing.

Ten minutes, I couldn't think about anything else: if we hadn't been able to sort it out within ten minutes, Kina would have died!

I got ready for Chidori. «Reishi! I'll knock out that beast! Strike its weak point!»

Before my voiced vanished in thin air, Reishi was already by my side: «Sasuke, Rōen is two o'clock!»

While Chidori was growing in my hand, I went near my target. I charged my arm and aimed at Rōen's face.

At that moment, however, Reishi pushed me away forcefully.

I immediately understood the reason: numerous kunai were aiming straight to me.

«Damn it! Who did it?!» I shouted after they had passed within an inch of my face. The Chidori in my hand dissolved with a crackle and vanished without leaving trace. We landed on the Hypericum's Shrine's roof and in a flash we found ourselves surrounded by several shadows.

«Sendō...»

A perfidious laughter dispersed Reishi's words.

«Fu fu fu! I would never have imagined that Kina was Rōen!»

«You're wrong! When Kina loses control because of rage, the seal can't restrain Rōen anymore!» shouted Reishi.

Jiryū Sendō laughed, sneering. «When Kina loses control because of rage? Are you implying that Rōen came out because of me?! Well, if things are like this, that monster will have to thank me! Because it was me who spurred the villagers, spreading the rumour that Kina is the culprit of the murders!»

«He, he, he!» laughed his men.

«There no time left! Please, I'll do anything! If we don't seal Rōen in the shrine as soon as possible, Kina will die!» Reishi begged them, on the verge of tears.

«Anything? Then give me the Kotarō's recipe.» said Jiryū.

«The Kotarō can be made only inside my body!»

«Oi! You said there's not time left, didn't you? You better do as the boss said!» one of the underlings urged him.

«Reishi, run after Rōen!» I said.

«Sasuke!»

«I'll take care of these ones and join you immediately.»

«But your eyes...»

I turned towards my opponents and stared at them with my clouded vision. «Don't worry. A little warm up is just what I need. Now, go!»

«Okay, Sasuke! I leave everything in your hands!»

As soon as he jumped up, some clan members dashed at him.

«Fire Release: Great Dragon Fire Technique!»

I created a burning curtain between Reishi and his enemies.

«You bastard! I've been watching you for a while and it looks like you can't see!» roared Jiryū Sendō.

I focused on my ears' nerves, strengthening my hearing more. When those men moved, I managed to sense the flow of their weak chakra: there were five of them to my right, four to my left and two more on the tree of the garden. Including Jiryū Sendō, they were twelve in total.

Although my eyes didn't see, I could tell their movements almost as if I was able to touch them.

«At the Mausoleum of the Thorny Mount we've been reckless, but now we've got you on a string! You're marked for death!» At the words of their boss, the men's chakra increased violently.

I heard the noise of something cutting through the air: the second man to the left was swinging a kusarigama.

«Hey, you guys! That fellow can't see! Make it up for the last time-»

I got the party started throwing three kunai. Jiryū got away by a hair, but the two men on the tree fell on the ground one after the other.

«Enough with the chitchatting. I'll take deal with you within ten seconds.» I said, pointing my finger at them.

«Who do you think we are?! Let's kill him!»

At that battle cry, one of them dashed at me.

In this kind of situation I couldn't certainly waste chakra, so I decided to face them with taijutsu only. I avoided his attack and hit him in the pit of his stomach with a punch.

«Gwah!» groaned the man before hitting the ground.

Bowing my body, I managed to avoid the kusarigama of another opponent and, after doing two backflips, I kicked him right in his jaw. After that I avoided several kunai, making them pass by the sides of my face, under my arms and between my legs.

«What the hell are you doing?! I told you he can't see, didn't I?!» shouted Jiryū Sendō.

Just hearing that voice was enough for me.

As a owl in the night, the eyes of my mind could see everything clearly.

The blade of a sword gleamed above my head. I managed to avoid the slashes and I hit the enemy's stomach with a kick. While he was swept away, the man lost his sword.

I promptly grabbed the weapon and tucked it under my armpit, hitting the opponent behind my back, who collapsed on the ground with a whine of pain.

Without stopping I drew out my kunai and, three on every hand, I sent them in every direction. The enemies screamed and their chakra started to weaken: I understood that I was holding them in my pocket.

At least two of them were left, but they didn't seem willing to flee. Then they emitted a strange scared scream and took it on the lam.

I couldn't stay there any longer. I sniffed out the wind, strained my ears and launched myself in Rōen's pursuit.

Jumping on the tree branches and the rooftops, I immediately reached that evil chakra.

«Reishi! Where are you?»

The response was instant: «I'm here, Sasuke! On a tree, ten o'clock!»

I took another jump in that direction and I landed on the spot in which Reishi was standing.

«How many minutes have passed?» I asked him.

«Five I think.»

«Then we have five minutes left. How do we proceed?»

«Make it or break it. I'll try with hypnosis. The Spiritual Communication of the Tiger and the Wolf!»

At those words he dashed towards Rōen.

The colour of my vision changed from white to light purple.

A sweet scent of cape jasmines enfolded us, increasing gradually in intensity.

From his chakra flow, I could tell that Rōen had stopped: his menacing aura had drastically decreased.

«Sasuke, don't inhale! If the Kotarō is absorbed by your body it'll make you lose your consciousness!»

I did as I was told.

«I'm coming to rescue you, Kina!» shouted Reishi.

Some passer-bys started shouting in panic.

«W-what's that purple smoke? People are passing out!»

«Hey! Don't inhale that thing, or else you'll lose consciousness!»

Rōen stopped walking and staggered: it seemed that its tentacles had lowered and his chakra was losing strength.

«It's under the effect of the hypnosis!»

Reishi, who had momentarily disappeared enveloped by the smoke, jumped on a wall and launched himself at Rōen's back. He positioned his fingers for the seal and quickly recited the incantation.

«Rōen Kodon!»

However he didn't manage to hit the creature's weak spot.

Regaining part of his chakra, Rōen managed to move its tail and hit Reishi laterally.

«Gwah!»

I promptly jumped in air, I seized Reishi's body and we both ended up against a large tree.

«I told you it's impossible to do it alone! The effect of the hypnotic genjutsu vanishes before you can proceed with the seal!» I shouted.

Reishi was about to answer me, but he was interrupted by a cannon's blow.

We both turned around.

«What's happening?!»

It was Jiryū Sendō who answered my question: «Wha, ha, ha! The guards have arrived!»

Without me noticing, he had climbed on a tree nearby.

«Ha, ha, ha! Come on, shoot down that monster with the greater cylinders! Hi, hi, hi! Ha, ha, ha!»

«Graaawr!» Rōen's roar shook the night.

«Stop that! It will completely go out of control!»

The rumble of the cylinders, however, didn't show sign of stopping and, to make matters worse, a rock that had missed its target shredded into thousand pieces the tree in which we were staying.

I grabbed Reishi's body as he flew in the air along with the pieces of wood. «Reishi, are you okay?»

As if he was possessed by who knows what, Reishi murmured: «Stop that! You mustn't use the greater cylinder! Have you forgotten what happened ten years ago? I can control Rōen! Stop it! That's enough!»

I was feeling a sense of uneasiness in my eyes.

«Stooop!»

With bloodshot eyes, Reishi put his hands in position and said: «Spiritual

Communication of the Tiger and the Wolf!»

«You idiot, calm down! You're too far!»

In the blink of an eye a dark purple smoke enshrouded everything.

Holding my breath I leapt and I dove into that thick mist.

Smoke swallowed me and closed ominously behind me. I swiftly put my hands in position, opened a breach and unleashed my chakra upward.

«Fire Release: Great Dragon Fire Technique!»

The energy generated morphed into a dragon and cleft the sky.

The thunderclouds gathered and discharged electric energy venting in violent thunderclaps.

Then Reishi came to his senses.

«W-what are you going to do, Sasuke?»

«Don't make me repeat it a hundred times! I want to knock out this monster!»
The wind rose, bringing rain with it.
I felt in my hand the energy of the electricity-laden clouds.
Rōen, attracted by the greater cylinders, was slowly heading towards the guards.
«I'll knock it down for sure!»
At that moment, however, something altered my five senses.
The rocks, hurled unceasingly, exploded with a huge bang every time they hit an object.
The rumbles of the blasts resonated in my ears.
Because of that turmoil, as well as with my sight, I started to have problems with my hearing too.
«I can't locate its position with precision! Lead me!» I shouted.
Reishi responded instantly: «To your right, three o'clock. It may be about fifty metres (165 feet).»
I focused my nerves on the point he told me and, following my senses, I positioned myself: half-past two, forty-nine metres (160 feet).
The rain started pouring more strongly and bolts of lightning streaked the night sky.
Every time that a rock hit it, Rōen went mad and flew into a rage, but it was a far cry from being overwhelmed. It went forward without hesitation, until the guards were within the range of its claws. Clearly defeated, the men screamed in panic.
«Oh no! The greater cylinder is useless!»
«Run!»
«Graawr!» Rōen's tentacles stretched out to the fleeing guards.
The blows randomly shot by the cylinders were causing a deafening noise. In spite of this, I was sure I could perform the technique perfectly.
Rōen's chakra was more and more powerful and ominous.
Linked to me, the thunders in the sky were roaring like a dragon while the voltage increased.
I aimed at Rōen's snout: «Don't get too full of yourself, monster! Kirin!»
My technique and the bullet of the greater cylinder were shot at the same time.
«Damn it!»
The world around me became so white and dazzling that I couldn't discern anything.
A violent explosion made the earth shake: the soil lifted, the rocks shattered into thousand pieces and the smell of charred trees filled the air.
Reishi and I jumped towards the beast.
«Did I strike him?!»
Under the pouring rain, I kept my eyes fixed on the dust that surrounded Rōen. In my ears the rumble of the explosion kept resounding like a bell.
«What's happening, Reishi? Did I hit him?!»
No answer was needed.
Thunderously cutting through the air, a tentacle seized me.
«Damn it! It avoided my attack!»
I drew my sword of Kusanagi and severed that sort of snake coiled around me with a single blow.
However the back of the creature writhed sinuously and produced a new one.
«Tsk!»
The moment I got distracted looking at the scene, the beast used its tail to seize me again.

«No! Gwah!» I shouted while I was thrown to the ground.

«Sasuke!»

At the edge of my visual field I saw Reishi's silhouette appearing.

Still holding me with its tail, Rōen threw me between its fangs: when those sharp jaws shut to cut me in half, numerous black crows soared in the air.

«Calm down. I'm here.» I told Reishi, placing my hand on his shoulder.

«S-sasuke! Are you all right?»

He looked like he had no idea of what was happening.

«I wouldn't say that. It stole me a lot of chakra.» I answered, kneeling on the ground.

«The part hit by the tentacle will immediately start to dry up. Take this, it should help you feel better.» said Reishi, pulling a pill out of his pocket.

I took the medicine: the pain went away quickly and I felt the remaining chakra gather in the open wounds.

«The injured parts have recovered.»

Doing this, however, I had reduced my chakra to a minimum.

With the smoke that kept rising from its back, Rōen headed again to the heart of the village.

«Damn it! If only that rock hadn't got in the way...»

Once again the world had deceived us, only to delude us the second after.

«How long have we left?» I asked Reishi.

«Two or three minutes.»

Wrath was growing relentless inside me.

My eyes became restless and my pupils began trembling in rage.

Like a shark, a feeling of powerlessness was eating me from inside.

«Sasuke...»

Reishi was staring at me with a confused look.

It was at that moment that I saw myself reflected in his eyes. I could easily distinguish my red pupils: I had regained my sight.

«Sasuke, your eyes...»

I felt my strength awaken in that body no more drained, but flooded with a torrent of chakra.

Reishi tried to place a hand on my shoulder, but he was repelled by a shock. Chakra was overflowing, dancing crackling in every part of my body.

I sensed Itachi's presence next to me. I wasn't fighting alone: no matter how many enemies the world held in store for me, I would never be alone.

At that thought, I felt proud.

Was there something more important and meaningful, by any chance?

«Brother, these eyes belong to me...» I murmured.

I didn't know if those words reached Reishi's ears or not.

«What are you talking about?!»

Rōen matched exactly the description the ferryman had made me: it had the head of a wolf, the body of a tiger and teeth as sharp as swords peered from its mouth ripped up to his ears. The tentacles on his back looked like silver sea anemones in all respects.

«Come on, let's go seal him.» I said, staring at the beast's back with my newly awakened mangekyō sharingan.

2

We set off in Rōen's pursuit under the pouring rain.

Reishi was holding some kunai in both his hands.

«Do you think those toys will be useful?» I asked him.

«They're soaked with poison. A mere scratch could kill an elephant.»

We arrived near our target, we leapt from a huge tree and we landed at the beast's sides at the same moment.

Reishi, to the right, threw a kunai at it aiming at his eyes, but Rōen managed to deflect them with its tentacles.

«Damn it!»

I took advantage of that moment to attack it on the opposite side. I focused my Chidori in my right hand and put the left in position.

Just like a cat bristling its fur, Rōen extended its tentacles in all directions. Cutting through the air light a whip, it gathered them in a rushing stream of silver light and dashed against me.

I inhaled deeply, I formed a ring with the thumb and forefinger of my right hand and I brought my fingers to my mouth.

«Fire Release: Great Dragon Fire Technique!»

The beast's tentacles were swiftly enveloped by flames.

«Graaawr!» roared Rōen writhing in pain, his back on fire.

«Sasuke! A tentacle, one o'clock, from your right hand!» Reishi shouted to me.

«Save your breath! I can see clearly now!» Twisting my torso, I jumped on the burning tentacle and I took flight towards the head of the beast.

The sky and the earth changed places.

I saw Reishi's worried face with his eyes staring at me.

I floated in midair for a tenth of a second, then I nosedived.

I pulled back my right hand and aimed at crown of Rōen's skull.

Numerous tentacles were chasing me like hungry snakes.

«Who do you think I am?!» I shouted.

Arching my back and tilting my head, I managed to avoid every one of them.

«Chidori!»

The cries of the monster faded in the rumble of the explosion.

Good job!

«Woooh!»

I pinned Rōen's head with all my strength and I hurled it on the ground.

The soil lifted and the rocks got swept in the air in a cloud of dust.

The monster had collapsed on the ground.

Reishi promptly threw his kunai, cutting through that thick dust cloud.

«Come ooon! Make it calm down!» he shouted.

Rōen, however, warded off the attack.

The kunai were rushing at full speed towards Reishi that, being in midair, wouldn't be able to avoid them.

«Shadow Shuriken Technique!»

Before they could scratch his body, I used the technique to sweep away all the kunai.

Sticking into the surrounding trees, they dyed the leaves in brown, making them dry in the blink of an eye.

Reishi straightened up and landed next to me. He was short of breath and was shaking violently.

We kept our eyes fixed on Rōen, which rose slowly from the dirt.

«We've only very short time left. What do we do?»

«Keep it still! Just a second will be enough for me.» I said.

Reishi answered me, stuttering: «B-but there's no Kotarō left in my body. The Spiritual Communication of the Tiger and the Wolf has-»

I grabbed him by his collar: «Stop whining! Either you make an effort now, or you'll lose Kina! There are no alternatives!»

«!»

«I don't give a damn about your reasons! Block that monster for three seconds, so that I'll be able to use my genjutsu!»

Reishi held his breath, and then he nodded vigorously.

Even if I had talked to him that way, I didn't have full confidence in myself.

How should I use my newly awakened mangekyō sharingan? I had no idea.

«I'll stop that monster at any cost. After that you'll strike it on its weak spot to seal it.» I said. With my mangekyō sharingan I was following Rōen's back, which had started to walk again.

«Okay.»

«After that you'll go and save Kina.»

«Yes.»

«However, you'll die. The moment you seal Rōen, his chakra will flow. My genjutsu will broke and the tentacles of that monster will kill you.»

«I'm ready.»

«I knew you'd say that.»

«Sasuke?»

«What's up?»

«Kina knows where I've put the recipe for the eye drops. Show it to another herbalist and he'll prepare it for you.»

«How can you not think about yourself in a moment like this?»

Reishi was speaking to me as if we were having a chat about the weather.

«Tell Kina it was me who dried up those people to death. This time, however, I'll be the one to die. Talking about dry humour! Ah, ah, ah!»

He was still feeling like joking?

I was dumbstruck by that attitude, as strong as sweet.

Enveloped by a gloomy green light, we exchanged a look and nodded with a relaxed expression.

Rōen's silhouette was walking away slowly, its back turned to us.

«Are you ready? We'll finish this within thirty seconds!» I said without turning around.

Reishi speeded up his pace and dashed towards the creature. When he reached it, he took a big jump, but he was immediately attacked by the tentacles. It didn't look like he intended to flee.

«What are you doing?! Move away, Reishi!» I shouted.

However Reishi surrendered to the tentacles. If he had really wanted to run, somehow he would have been able to.

There was no time to think.

«Shadow Shuriken Technique!»

Coming out with a rumble, the Shadow Shuriken cut down to the root the tentacle that was restraining him.

I saw Reishi fall to the ground, but he didn't look dead: such a foolish move couldn't have killed him!

If my eyes weren't fooling me, a satisfied smile appeared on his mouth. After that, he pulled out something from his pocket and he threw it against Rōen's face, covering it in a smokescreen.

«Reishi!» I yelled.

Rōen shook its head to get rid of the smoke that was enfolding it and, as if nothing had happened, he resumed walking.

«What are you doing?!» I shouted, gritting my teeth.

Time was flowing relentlessly. Only twenty seconds were left. There was no time to stop. I launched off in Rōen's pursuit.

«Chidori Current!»

Together with a strong crackling sound, the Chidori spread on the ground like a net, hitting the second group of guards that were still holding a greater cylinder.

«And with this, get out of my way.»

Struck by the electric shock, the men fell one after another.

Fifteen seconds.

Rōen stopped suddenly. Swirling violently its forepaws it was trying to send away the numerous green lights that were gathering around its face. From the bushes, from the gardens of the houses, from the treetops, from the riverbed the shogun fireflies had silently taken flight and, just like a river, had poured on the creature, completely enveloping its body.

Ten seconds.

«Right! Well done, Reishi!»

I understood that the substance he had poured on Rōen earlier was nothing but the powder created expressly for Kina.

Nine seconds.

No matter how much Rōen tried to get rid of the insects, it didn't manage to send them away in any way.

«Stand up, Reishi! It's no time to sleep!» I lectured him sternly.

Eight seconds.

I went in front of the creature, I pulled out my sword and I jumped on his head. The fireflies scattered confusedly in the air from the shock.

When the green light enveloped me, I sensed Reishi's presence near me: his love for his brother dwelled in every single insect.

Seven seconds.

I thrust my sword through Rōen's upper jaw and, holding my sword with both my hands, in one stroke I went as far as piercing the lower jawbone.

With its mouth sewn shut in that way, the beast emitted a choked scream, while blood leaked out of the wound.

Six seconds.

«You damn monster!»

Beyond the green light, I perfectly distinguished two red eyes, wide opened.

At that moment I understood everything about the mangekyō sharingan: I felt like a newborn fish, which already knows how to swim without having been taught by anybody.

Five seconds.

I felt my eyes throbbing deep.

«Prepare yourself! I'm about to go inside you!»

Four seconds.

The insects scattered confusedly in the air, making the faint light they emitted flicker.

The sound of bells echoed in the distance: it marked the beginning of the genjutsu.

Three seconds.

The sky dyed in red and the earth dyed in black. For all the creatures in the world time had stopped.

Light vanished from Rōen's eyes.

Two seconds.

Countless crows clouded the sky and when I noticed, I was already in that place.

3

I opened my eyes: I was in the midst of a dark forest, enveloped by a thick night fog.

Despite the deep darkness, I could distinctly see every thing.

A red moon, which was shedding bloody tears, was shining high in the sky.

I felt the presence of mysterious creature everywhere.

I went deep into the forest and after a while I came across a stone monument that I'd already seen: it was the same one of the Kodon Shrine, the one with the word "worship", the wolf and the tiger engraved on it. This time, however, in addition to being intact, the sculpture was emanating a terribly dark chakra.

The word "seal" was engraved on the wolf's back, while the symbol on the tiger, that appeared indecipherable to me at the Kodon Shrine, was now perfectly readable: "seven".

«It's the same name written on Itachi's request. It can't be a coincidence. Stop hiding.

How about coming forward?» I said.

The boy with the hawk mask came forward from the darkness.

«What does the number seven mean?»

«Why should I tell you?»

«Because you're me, you're Itachi, you're the only witness that watched accurately the greatness and the decadence of the Uchiha clan. Have you forgotten?»

The boy stood still, without uttering a word.

«And moreover, you're also Kina and Reishi. Am I right?»

«If Reishi seals Rōen in the shrine, Kina will be freed.»

«I know it. Reishi himself told me about it.»

«However the seal won't be effective forever. Every seven years the incantation must be repeated.»

«!»

«In this village, such task belongs to the Kodon clan. If after seven years the creature isn't sealed, it shows up again wreaking havoc. The same thing happened in the past.»

In the depth of the forest something began to move nervously, growing more and more in intensity until it made the night sky tremble. I understood that that world was about to shut.

«I don't care.»

«You don't care?»

«I only want to save Kina. That's all.» I said.

The boy burst out laughing and shrugging he told me: «So typical of you, Sasuke Uchiha.»

«You can provoke how much you want, but it won't do.»

«...»

«My heart has already decided.»

Followed by a thunderclap, a lightning bolt fell next to us and slashed a huge tree in half. I raised my eyes towards the pitch-black sky and I saw numerous purplish thunderbolts streaking it in every direction.

«We have no time left. Reishi started sealing Rōen.» I said.

«In this world time has no meaning.»

«What's your goal? If you've got no intention of saving Reishi and Kina, what did you come here for?»

«I knew it was impossible, but I wanted to do something to save those brothers.» answered the boy, lowering his eyes.

«Hypocrite.»

«...»

«However I have no right to criticise you: you killed for me, didn't you?»

I received no answer.

«When we can protect just one thing, whatever it is, regret will haunt us throughout the entire course of our life. There's nothing left to do for us but try to accept it, at the best of our abilities.» I said.

«Are you telling me that you're ready to live together with your regrets? I already asked you this. What's your nature? What will your true self do from now on? Is this then your authentic being?»

I stared at that red-eyed boy. «Should the entire world not accept those two brothers, I'd do it anyway. Reishi and Kina are just like me: their mutual existences are the more important thing there is. I don't know if I can define myself ready in such way, but this is my true nature.»

«Are you going to destroy the Leaf at any cost?»

«Yeah.»

«Are you even willing to sever all the bonds, as you did when you left the village?»

«The bond I wish for doesn't exist anymore.»

«What about Kina and Reishi?»

«There's no place for me between the two of them. That's why I want to save them: for my own well.»

«Itachi didn't wish you to go against the Leaf.»

«I know. However, if I didn't do it I wouldn't know how to prove it to myself.»

«Prove what?»

«The fact that Itachi lives inside me, that he keeps existing in my heart.»

The boy burst out laughing. «It looks like you solved the enigma of this world.»

I held my breath for a moment, then I said: «This world is constituted by Itachi's memories impressed on the mangekyō sharingan. He probably had looked into Kina's heart.»

Tears were streaming profusely on my face.

«And you are Itachi Uchiha, my brother.»

The boy had disappeared: now in front of my eyes there was him, Itachi, and it seemed to me that that had always been his place.

The Akatsuki cloak fluttered in the wind.

«Itachi...»

«Even if you were to sever every bond, I'll stay here for eternity.» His voice sounded like a feeble breath of breeze to me.

He slowly raised his hand, until he placed it on the mask. I caught a glimpse of the jaw first, then the lips: his face began to appear little by little.

However the time at our disposal ran out all of a sudden.

The magnetic field that constituted that world started to warp.

As a shattered hourglass, the forest disappeared, loosing countless crows in the sky.

I understood that in the real world Reishi had sealed Rōen.

«Itachi!»

I fell headfirst on the hole that had suddenly opened under my feet.

While I collapsed in a bottomless darkness, for a moment I managed to see it: Itachi's mouth was moving, without emitting any sound.

«Even if you were to sever every bond...»

Tears were falling like rain, from the earth towards the sky.

That's how I went through the black dream and came out.

«...I'll stay here for eternity.»

That impossible to hear voice echoed in my ears forever.

Naruto: Chronicles of the Thunderclap

The day of the wolf's cry

Chapter 6: The day of the memory

1

Five days later a commemoration was held to celebrate the victory over Rōen and to pray that it won't afflict the village anymore.

Among fireworks and stalls, the main street teemed with cheering people. Without even knowing how Reishi had died, the villagers were having fun peeking around the shops, drinking alcoholics and playing outside.

Like two shadows, Kina and I were quietly making our way through the noisy crowd and the cheerful accompanying music.

The people we met greeted Kina with a nod, patted his shoulder and addressed kind words to him. Every time, Kina answered them with a faint smile.

Once we got close to the square, we found ourselves in front of a huge crowd.

In the middle of all those people there was him: Jiryū Sendō.

With his kimono in disarray and his eyes wide open, he was telling the people the heroic deeds of Kina Kodon, the one who had chased Rōen away.

«We had been completely fooled! I saw it with my very eyes! For generations that monster had hidden itself in the Kodon clan! The murders had been coming one after another over time, hadn't they? Even the other day a lot of our guys had been drained just like stockfishes, but one of them, who had managed to run to safety, told me the name of the culprit: Reishi Kodon! Upon my arrival at the Hypericum's Shrine, the two brothers had already been dragged outside and beaten up. The elder was showing a shameful display. He hid behind his brother all the time! It's a real shame I can't show you the whole scene!»

One of the bystanders teased him with an amused look: «Hey, Jiryū Sendō! Could it have been you the shameful one?»

«At Rōen's sight, you wetted yourself with fear, didn't you?» continued another one promptly.

The crowd burst out laughing uproariously, affecting Jiryū as well.

«And then? What happened next?»

«Er, where was I?»

«Oi! Act seriously! The elder was showing a shameful display, then?!»

Jiryū slapped his forehead with his hand. «Ah, right! Reishi Kodon had managed to fool us all. But I saw him with these very eyes, his pupils very glowing with a red light and then, suddenly: boom! With a deafening noise, he showed himself in his true appearance!»

The bystanders were listening breathless.

«What do you think he did next? He started to attack randomly the villagers, the police, the guards! Countless tentacles were sprouting out of his back, which could suck out people's chakra! Whoever touched them turned in a stockfish! After that, with a creepy voice, he said exactly this: "I don't need the Kodon clan anymore. Now that I'm free, I'll kill all the villagers"! I'm not kidding, I heard it with my very ears! From that moment on, hell broke loose. I had climbed on a tree, but Rōen stretched a paw towards me. At

that moment Kina Kodon came like a blast of wind and rescued me!» shouted Jiryū, spluttering around.

«The death clash between the two has been so gripping that I can't even describe it! When Kina was about to win out blowing fire from his mouth, here comes the beast, trying to suck out his chakra in any way! In a succession of attacks and defence, the battle went on till morning. In the end Kina Kodon, with that legendary sword that belonged to Orochimaru, managed to hit Rōen! Reduced to a wretched and frail spirit, the creature was finally sealed in the Kodon Shrine!»

A shower of applause and yells burst from the audience.

Kina began walking and I followed him.

We let a bunch of drunkards through, we went through a rowdy alley with stalls and we left through the huge gate of the village.

Even there numerous stalls were gathered and the light-hearted laughter of the people came to us from every direction.

Going through the road of the eighty-eight torii, we began getting down the mountain.

It was at that moment that Kina spoke for the first time after five days of silence.

«I don't remember anything. My brother had been beaten and as soon as I noticed, they beat me too. I went furious and then I lost consciousness, right?»

«Yeah.»

«Meanwhile, Reishi turned into Rōen?»

«Yes.»

«Where are we going?»

«Shut up! Just follow me.» I answered.

«Is it true that a threat looms over the Village of the Wolf's Cry?»

«Your choice to believe it or not.»

«Yet the fact that my brother had been possessed by the monster does not convince me a bit.»

«Jiryū Sendō's tale is true.» I said, after a long pause.

«Sasuke?»

«The Kodon clan was made up of great ninja. You can't remember anything because your father had impressed on you the formula of the technique that, with Rōen's apparition, would activate to protect the village.»

«Why would he do such thing?»

«Because there are things that are better to forget too.»

Illuminated by the sunrises that seeped through the trees, we passed under all the torii, one after the other.

I was tied down by my own lies.

The moment Reishi had died among Rōen's tentacles was indelibly impressed in my eyes.

2

«Sasuke, take care of Kina.» These were his last words.

The sound of the wind, the gurgling of the river, the shadow of the clouds, the chirping of the migratory birds: Reishi's quiet and proud voice belonged to all these things and was one of the most pleasant sounds in the world.

«Graaawr!»

The monster's scream of agony rose through the air. Rōen howled for a long time, as if it was cursing the sky.

«Graaawr!»

I heard a noise similar to the one made by a ripped tyre, and I was thrown through the air.

It was enough for me to understand that the effect of the genjutsu had ended.

My sight had blurred because of the mangekyō sharingan, which I wasn't used to yet.

When I rubbed my eyes with my hands, I noticed that they were bleeding.

In a now colourless world, I saw Rōen's tentacles rise up all together without emitting any sound. After they pierced the sky for a moment, they swallowed Reishi just like huge silver waves.

An intense oscillation propagated through the ground making it tremble and a beam of light came out from the beast's back. Going through the night sky, the trail of light reached and pierced the clouds laden with rain.

«W-what the hell's that stuff?»

I turned towards that rather rummy voice and I caught a glimpse of a man on the nearby tree.

«The monster has calmed down all of a sudden! Its body is turning transparent!» shouted Jiryū Sendō.

Using my last strength left, I joined him with a jump.

«Wah! What are you doing? Stop it! Is this really the time for that? Rōen is turning into something strange!» mumbled Jiryū, who had lost every ounce of courage.

«Shut up and look into my eyes.» I said, grabbing him forcefully by his shoulders.

Although a searing pain was preventing me to keep my eyes open, I strove not to shut my eyelids.

Just like the moon in that black dream, bloody tears were leaking out of my mangekyō sharingan.

My vision became dim. I couldn't distinguish almost anything.

«Gwooooh!»

An auditory hallucination took over the world and Jiryū Sendō's scared eyes suddenly widened. It was the signal that the reality, melting like ice little by little, was leaving space to genjutsu.

The door of the genjutsu swung open, sucking Jiryū inside it.

«W-what's happening? Where am I?»

Running blindly in a blood-red forest, it seemed he didn't have a clue on what had happened, where he was, who he truly was.

After all, it was impossible that he knew.

In that world things went according to my thoughts: just like a kaleidoscope, the mangekyō sharingan projected my consciousness on the enemy's. To every consciousness there was a world, so for hundred people there were hundred different worlds. I was the god of that world, and the god was me.

Even time flowed according to my will.

From the heights of the sky I watched Jiryū Sendō running aimlessly.

«I'll show you a new reality.» I said.

My eyes turned into two red moons, enlightening the night sky.

«You'll tell everyone what I'm about to show you.»

«Waaah! Help! Somebody help me!»

«You'd like to take possession of Reishi's Kotarō, am I right?»
I took Kina's appearance and I walked in front of him.
Jiryū Sendō fell on the ground out of shock. «Wah! Where have you sprung from, you brat?!»
«You're trapped into an illusion from which you'll never wake up.»
«Never? Something like that is impossible!»
I focused my strength in my eyes. «You're wrong. I just need to crush that petty brain of yours. Come on, look at me!»
For the next seventy-two hours, I tormented Jiryū Sendō.
However, I'm referring to the time inside the genjutsu: it took me only a handful of seconds in real life.
I completely destroyed the man's meninges and I transplanted the reality I wished to show him a million times.
I was so exhausted that at the end of the illusion I couldn't even stand on my feet.
I still needed quite some time before I could skilfully use my mangekyō sharingan.
In the real world, Jiryū Sendō fell from the tree.
I found difficult even breathing.
I felt no relief for what I had managed to do: I felt, on the contrary, burdened with a huge sense of powerlessness, similar to that nostalgic feeling that you duly sense at the end of a battle.
Rōen was disappearing gradually. Its body went more and more transparent, until it became invisible to my aching eyes. In the end it turned to a wisp of smoke and flew towards the Kodon Shrine.
That scene was the first memory impressed on my mangekyō sharingan.

3

Without me noticing, the accompanying music of the party had disappeared from my ears.
Once we finished our descent, we passed under the last torii.
We walked for a while towards the sea, red for the sun at dusk.
On the boat that had brought me in that place, the ferryman was slumbering quietly.
The sea breeze was blowing through the pines.
When I was about to call for the ferryman, Kina tugged the rim of my kimono.
With a barely audible voice, he told me: «Sasuke, I'm not coming.»
I listened to him silently, with the sensation that he was talking to himself.
«This story doesn't convince me at all. I've got the feeling that I've a giant hole in my head and that I've forgotten something important.»
I answered him with a lie: «A thing that is forgotten isn't worth to be remembered.»
«But if we take what Jiryū Sendō said as true, where should Orochimaru's legendary sword be?» he retorted.
«After you used it to strike Rōen, it turned into smoke and vanished into thin air.»
«And I can't spew fire out of my mouth for sure!»
«Well, this kind of tales is always a bit comical. And that guy's not all there too.
Watching such a dreadful scene must've hurt him bad.»
«It's absurd I saved someone like Jiryū Sendō.»

«Yet you did it. Listen, Kina: Rōen is not dead, within seven years he'll break the seal and come back to your village. There's no one capable of sealing him again.»

Kina looked at me, worried.

«Reishi entrusted me with you. I won't leave you alone in the village and let you killed by that monster.» I said.

«What are you going to do?»

«I don't know yet. I could train you until you become strong enough to fend for yourself. When you're a true ninja, you'll go wherever you want.»

Kina lowered his eyes and clenched his teeth. «I'm going back to the village.»

«No.»

«I don't understand why, but I feel that if I leave the village now I'll end up forgetting my brother as well. Since that night, the villagers treat me too familiarly.» His voice was stammering, but he spoke in a firm tone.

«It's what you wanted.»

«Yes, but not in this way. Furthermore, I can't leave my brother by himself. He really loved plants and flowers. He was very happy when he passed the exam to become herbalist. He was always laughing. I would only have liked to help him with the preparation of his medicaments and listen to those odd puns of his forever.» With words stuck in his throat, he put the hawk mask on.

Inside my heart, I asked Itachi what could I do to help Kina.

«You'll die. Do you think that Reishi will be able to forgive you?» I said.

«Probably not.»

«Then...»

Kina raised his eyes and said: «However he'll do it in the end. I may be wrong and find nobody in the world willing to understand me: however, I will always have my brother's forgiveness.»

I will always have my brother's forgiveness.

Now I understand.

«Who's Itachi? For the Leaf, a good spy; for the Uchiha clan, a traitor; for Akatsuki, a disposable pawn. And then for you, Sasuke Uchiha...»

The boy of the black dream had told me these words.

Who was Itachi for me?

At that moment I didn't cover my ears, but I whispered to myself: «Itachi is my only brother.»

For an instant the world shone with a dazzling light, filled up with hope and lost any trace of pain.

«Your concern really makes me happy, Sasuke. But I'll go back to the village.»

I couldn't answer.

«It's impossible that my brother did such a thing. I don't know how to say it, but I feel so here.» said Kina, bumping his chest several times.

«If Reishi had been here, he'd have told one of his absurd jokes.»

«Yeah. He, he, he!»

«Don't cry, you moron.»

«I-I'm not crying. Mine's a laugh.»

«You're going to die.»

«!»

«If you don't want to, in these seven years train hard and outdo Reishi.»

«Yeah.»

«If you die instead, it'll mean that you'll join him strutting and filled with pride.»

His shoulders shaking, Kina nodded heartily, holding back his sobs from under his mask.

I raised my hand and poked his forehead.

«Don't worry: my brother is there, too, and I'll join him sooner or later.»

Kina bowed his head.

Even if there wasn't even the shadow of a flower around us, the scent of cape jasmines hovered in the air. No matter how strong the wind would blow, it could never disperse that nostalgic scent.

Even our sadness was enveloped by that sweet floral fragrance.

«Maybe you and I are still brats.»

«Sasuke...»

«But in this world growing up means dying. Walk along the path you believe in.»

At those words, I turned back.

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The day of the wolf's cry

Epilogue: The beginning of revenge

As soon as I got out of the boat, I felt something slip off my body.
I sat down on the reef. I probably wouldn't be able to take a step further.
Beyond the bay the Three Wolves could be seen: in those mountains Kina was going back to the village, Reishi was resting in peace and Rōen was quietly sharpening its claws.
In the whistling of the wind I thought I heard the cry of a wolf.
«For his most beloved brother... to fight with you and die in front of you.»
As foaming wave crests that come back to the sea after they've crashed on the shore, Madara's words were confusingly approaching me, only to later disappear into the distance.
«He received a brand of shame in change of honour, and hatred in change of affection. But despite everything, Itachi died happy. Happy to have entrusted you with the name of the Uchiha, carrying the truth with him to his grave.»
Sitting on the reef, I saw three sunsets and three sunrises.
The morning of the third day, Juugo arrived.
I stood up and turned my gaze to the sea: I would never get tired of that scenery.
«The others are coming.»
«How did you come to know where I was?»
Juugo pointed to a hawk that was flying in the sky tracing an arc. «Did you forget? I understand the language of the animals.»
We stayed in that way for a long while.
«Forgive me, Sasuke. I'll teach you next time.»
Every time I asked him to watch me in my training sessions, he avoided the subject in that way, but it was fine with me. It was enough for me to pass some time with him, sometimes.
Even that day I had insisted that he watched me in my shuriken training.
«I'm busy. Ask Father to teach you.»
I had answered him, pulling a face: «You always treat me as if I were a bother.»
As usual, he had ignored the subject.
«Even if you were to hate me, I'll be always the wall for you to overcome.»
He had told me this once.
«Even if you were to sever every bond...»
Why didn't I notice before?
«...I'll stay here for eternity.»
Itachi has always been by my side.
«Sasuke, I'm with you.»
Without me noticing, everyone had arrived: Madara, Suigetsu, Karin and Juugo.
While I observed the sea I exclaimed: «The snake shed its skin. From now on, our team will be named Taka.»

Beyond the sea I could see Kina's figure, which was telling me that he wanted to go back to the village. He had hurried to put his mask on in order not to show me his tears.

I thought about the inhabitants of the Village of the Wolf's Cry that, without feeling an ounce of Kina's and Reishi's anguish, were revelling at the party. I also remembered about the people of the Leaf, who were enjoying the peace and living in idleness without knowing the pain Itachi and I have felt.

I felt my eyes trembling with nothing to stop them.

«And Taka has just one goal: destroy the Leaf.»

The waves were crushing on the reef.

Nobody said a word.

Brother, I'll surpass you.

Even if it were a mistake.

Even if I were to find myself alone walking across a bloody path.

Without begging for anyone's mercy, I'll let myself burn by the hell's flames.

This is my path.